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Teamwork

Teams: It's All in The Planning

BY LAWRENCE HOLPP

Why do many companies form teams, only to dissolve them at the first sign of trouble? Maybe because they didn't plan properly. Here are 10 questions to help determine whether creating a team is worth it.

MANY PEOPLE are still paying homage to teams, teamwork, empowerment, and self-management, but others have become disillusioned.

In the last year, dozens of firms have halted team-development efforts because they were too costly, didn't provide quick enough results, or were poorly understood by line management.

Here are some examples of real organizations that dropped the teamwork ball.

▶ A major aerospace manufacturer developed a five-day training program for managers of team leaders. It was designed to help managers understand the dynamics of the high-performance work groups that were forming spontaneously in the ranks.

After two pilot sessions, a training program, and a train-the-trainer course, the training was blessed by management but never delivered. Boxes of books and tapes now sit in a warehouse. At another location, the same company trained team facilitators to guide teams, then failed to provide them with any internal guidance or structure to work with the teams.

▶ A national home-improvement retailer built a massive 500,000-square-foot facility with the latest technology at its new distribution center. The retailer wanted to hire the best people and make sure they could work well together. After a selection procedure, a leadership program for management and team leaders, and a team-training program for all new employees, it abandoned the effort when technical systems crashed.

▶ A major North Carolina insurance company, fascinated by the concept of employee empowerment, had made headway in team development. Until, that is, its market share began declining. Now, talk of teams is dead, and employees already working in teams wonder where the support went.

"Management never commits the time and effort it takes. And everybody is already overworked," says Terry Mueller, HR manager for Terex Worldwide Parts Distribution Center, Southaven, Mississippi. "Management waves its wand and expects teams to form. It sees only the work and doesn't realize that teams can pay dividends in the long run."

Mueller, a veteran of several abandoned team programs, acknowledges that management has good intentions but poor follow-through due to pressures from upper management to produce quick results.

Why do successful companies like those get started with teams and then drop the effort at the first sign of inconvenience? Many of the reasons involve a lack of planning. In working with organizations that have experimented with teams, some successfully and some not, we found that if they had asked and answered a few questions beforehand, they could have increased their chances for success.

Jim Stevens, director of human resources for Alberta Pacific Forest Products says, "We spent one year planning how our teams would be organized, before we put them in place. We thought about where they would be located, who would be on them, how much technical and team training they would get, and when they would get it."

But many companies don't have the luxury of planning for a year before start-up. For companies contem-

plating teams, teamwork, or an empowerment strategy, here are a few questions to ask before hand. Answering, or even just discussing these questions, will give you a feel for the planning required.

What are teams? It's a simple enough question, but one that's seldom asked. We all think we know intuitively what teams are. Guess again. Here are some questions to help define team configurations.

- ▶ Are the teams going to be natural work groups or project- and task-oriented?
- ▶ Will they be self-managed or self-directed?
- ▶ Will they exist temporarily or last for years?
- ▶ How many people will be on the teams; who's in charge?
- ▶ How will the teams fit into the organization's structure if it shows only boxes and not circles or other new organizational forms?

It's important to have a written definition of the teams' purpose and status and how the teams will fit into the organization. The definition should address these issues:

- ▶ the number of people on a team
- ▶ whether the team is natural (functional), cross-functional, or project-based (short-lived)
- ▶ the key roles of members, leaders, managers, and others who may affect the success of the team
- ▶ team boundaries, and the kind and amount of autonomy and authority team members will have.

By defining terms, you, as an HR professional, can deliver an important message about your company's values on how people work and what's expected of them.

Why do you want teams? If teams are just a convenient way to group under one manager a lot of people who used to work for several downsized supervisors, don't bother. But if the teams can truly take ownership of work areas and provide the kind of up-close knowledge that's unavailable elsewhere, then full speed ahead.

By answering the question Why teams? you consider which business issues teams should address. Without that, you place the teams on shaky ground.

Without a strong business purpose, team efforts will be among the first projects to suffer in the event of a downturn or scarcity of resources.

Having to justify teams from a business perspective makes you consider the nature of your own work—how tasks are divided, your organizational strategy and design, and your staffing. Teams challenge functional silos—uncommunicative work groups that should be interacting.

Thinking about teams as a business strategy can cause an organization to rethink its overall business strategy. Teams are only part of a larger picture that includes products, services, customer relationships, competitive position, and broader economic issues.

Where do you plan to use teams? Too often an organization uses teams in areas in which a lot of people are milling about doing similar things. "Hum," some dreamy-eyed manager says, "looks like a team to me."

Not everyone in the organization is going to be on a team. Or, maybe everyone is; it's up to the organization. But everyone will be anxious until they know how they'll be affected.

It's important to identify the areas and groups conducive to teams because of their work or the organization's business requirements. Let them know about the team effort and give them a timetable and expectations. Let others who aren't involved directly know what their roles will be and whether they will participate in the overall effort.

Few organizations switch to a team-based structure in one swoop. For example, traditional power bases can threaten the success of teams in power-based units or other departments. Helping non-threatening units understand their roles with respect to teams and the importance of the effort can persuade them to support teams.

Here are a few guidelines. They are by no means universal, but they can help, especially if the organization has a trust-based relationship with employees.

- ▶ Is work subject to decision making on the spot by experienced people who deal directly with customers?
- ▶ Is there a need for cross-training so that, in time, everyone can do all of the jobs in a specific work area?

▶ Are employees in the targeted work area already functioning like a team by sharing information, solving problems, and raising important issues?

▶ Do the people in the area like and respect each other?

What do you expect from teams? It's rare that seasoned business managers implement a costly strategy, purchase a million-dollar piece of equipment, or sponsor an expensive move from one office to another without clearly articulated expectations. Yet, businesses enter into costly, risky, and sometimes poorly planned team programs without once stating in writing the results they want. If an organization expects higher productivity, lower costs, improved quality, or a reduced workforce, it should say so. And don't forget to set targets and goals.

Without clear goals it's difficult to assess team performance—unless things go really badly or really well. Without goals, comparing unit performance before and after team implementation is like contrasting the effectiveness of gasoline versus solar power. Both produce energy, but their start-up maintenance and long-term costs are different.

What are the timetables and milestones? It has often been suggested that a successful team effort can take three to five years. But if you wait that long to decide whether the effort has been a success, you may get a surprise.

Team development does take a long time, and many things change—including management, membership, technology, and business goals. How can you measure the effectiveness of a work unit that may have turned over once or twice, that is reporting to new management with new goals, and that has changed its principal focus and responsibilities?

You should plan to measure regularly whether you use standard metrics like productivity and quality, development indicators like the degree of authority in decision making, process measures like opinion surveys, or a combination of all three.

Identify indicators before starting. Brainstorm a list of things you expect from teams for the next one or two years. When the time comes to take your readings, be honest. Share results

with the team and establish new benchmarks based on what you learn. **What are the leaders' roles?** The importance of roles cannot be overstated. Leaders who don't have a clear vision (and the training to support it) of their roles in achieving consensus, gaining commitment, and developing people are likely to revert to the behavior of traditional frontline supervisors.

Leaving the roles of managers, supervisors, or team leaders to chance can cause ambiguity and confusion. Without clear roles and expectations, managers and supervisors will steer clear of anything that smacks of teams. They're likely to hope that the whole business just goes away.

Many organizations have taken the bold, cost-cutting step of eliminating

layers of supervisors or managers in favor of teams. But many have also been forced to backtrack and reinstitute some form of leadership. The first step in creating a team may have little to do with the team itself. But a great deal has to do with how people are managed.

Changing the role of the leader from commander to collaborator will get a work group functioning like a decision-making body. As the leader becomes more skilled at developing decision-making abilities within the team, he or she can step back and assume other duties while the team takes on leadership responsibilities.

Leaders may not change their behavior overnight, but the change process must start with guidelines that lead to new roles.

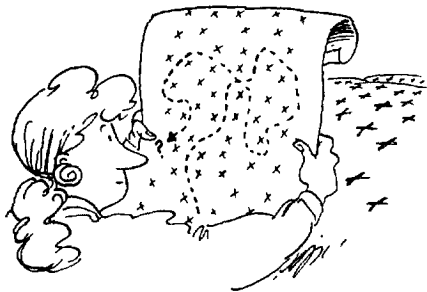
How will you assess performance? Of all the traditional norms that teams may endanger, the one-on-one, boss-subordinate relationship is perhaps the most critical and personal. Most organizations have a long-standing tradition of appraising lower-level employees not on their results, but on their traits and behaviors, including job skills, safety awareness, personal characteristics, friendliness, and assertiveness. Some of those factors are job relevant; some are not. But most focus on individuals, on a case-by-case basis.

Will you treat a team as a unit whose members are responsible for each other's performance? Or, will you focus on individual skills and abilities? And who manages the focus—the team, the team leader, or management? Perhaps a combination of team measurement and individual appraisal is best. But still, who conducts the performance appraisals—the boss or the team? And how is a team supposed to deal with different work styles among its members. Should members learn to tolerate differences and appreciate diversity? Or, should they seek a standard work style with little variation and uniform output?

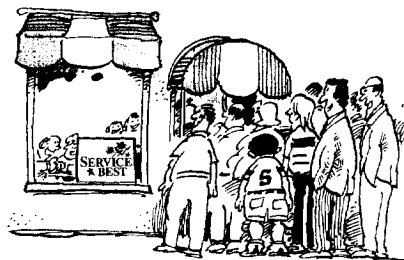
At the prospect of becoming an empowered work group, employees face many intriguing decision-making opportunities—such as hiring, firing, disciplining, rewarding, and appraising each other.

Few teams make those decisions. Most concentrate on doing the work,

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leaving such tasks to managers and supervisors. But those that do become involved in performance management need the same training as supervisors and managers. Training can take a week or longer, and requires skill practice, on-the-job coaching, and monitoring. In short, don't give teams responsibilities you aren't able to train them to accept.

How will you compensate teams? Because it can be a tricky issue outside management's control, team compensation is often ignored until problems arise.

Although many companies have skill-based pay or special-incentive bonus programs, others fail to address compensation issues at all. The result can be that team members work together but are offered incentives only for their individual contributions. Some teams lose interest when they're asked to do more with less and then aren't rewarded. They require monetary and symbolic non-monetary rewards such as cups, celebratory dinners, and plaques.

What resources do you need? This question represents not so much a plea for funds from a greedy training department, but a realistic appraisal of the costs of launching teams.

It's essential to be accurate about the amount of training, meeting time, and resources needed for a team effort. For example, in one organization, the one-hour-a-week meeting that teams expected turned into two to three hours per person as team members followed up on meeting assignments, prepared for meetings, and learned new procedures.

All teams should learn more about communicating and problem solving. But they also need trial-and-error practice as they become self-managed. Effective supervisors aren't trained in a day; neither are teams. During its first year, a new team may require five to 10 percent of its budget for training, meetings, and team-related activities. Those expenses can cut into productivity and discourage managers who haven't considered all of the costs.

What is the overall affect of teams? This final question may not be easy to answer, especially at the start of a team effort. But it is worth considering. Typically, teams change an

organization's culture.

Restructuring for teams means that the traditional systems for employee hiring, firing, appraisal, and career development change. Teams mean rethinking and probably rewriting HR policies, job descriptions, performance-appraisal forms, union agreements, and many other elements.

If your organization is moving in the

direction of teams, don't let it stumble along by trial and error. Taking an active role will help avoid pitfalls, and you'll be able to claim some responsibility for the success of teams. ■

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