Chapter 2

Team building and team dynamics

introduction

A great deal of research has been published on team building and team dynamics. Eventhough most of this research is purely academic and has been performed in a research environment rather than in the workplace, some of it does contain value for the nowadays’ workplace.

In particular, there have been two studies that one should be familiar with: **Bruce Tuckman’s ‘Stages for a Group**’ and **Richard Hackman’s ‘Five Factor Model.’** Both of these are described in detail as well as how they can be of help with practical day-to-day team building. How one defines a team varies according to the context they are referring to, but it is useful to look at three widely accepted definitions:

*‘[A team is a] group in which members work together intensively to achieve a common goal.’ (Lewis-McClear & Taylor, 1998)*

*‘A team is a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they are mutually accountable.’ (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993)*

*‘[A team is made up of people] working together in a committed way to achieve a common goal or mission. The work is interdependent and team members share responsibility and hold themselves accountable for attaining the results.’ (MIT Information Services and Technology, 2007)*

The common thread in each of these definitions is that teams consist of a group of people who share a common understanding of their goal and work together to accomplish it.

None of these definitions states whether the team is a fixed or a transient entity, yet in the world of work there are many examples of permanent or temporary teams:

* A temporary team could be brought together to:
* investigate or solve a specific issue
* design a new product or service
* act as a committee to resolve an issue
* A permanent team could be brought together
* to act as a steering committee
* with responsibility for a specific function
* from the same functional area who meet regularly to seek work improvement opportunities

Whilst the purpose of the team may be described as permanent in the examples above it is inevitable that the membership of this type of team will change over time.

This will happen for a variety of reasons: For example, individual members, including the leader, may leave or be replaced; those with a scarce skill may be seconded to another team which may be in greater need of their particular skills, or a team’s composition will change, even if the purpose remains, when an enterprise is taken over by or merged with another.

The support structure at one’s disposal will directly affect the success of a team and the ability to reward, develop, inform and resolve conflict between the members of a team will play a significant role in a team’s success.

Whether being permanent or temporary, successful teams bring considerable benefits to organisations:

Many projects in the workplace are too complex or difficult for one individual to complete and the existence of teams ensures the project’s timely success. This is especially true of IT development projects and organization-wide projects.

Perhaps one of the most important benefits of a team is that of increased and broader-based expertise when compared to an individual. One person on their own do not have all the necessary skills to deliver a product or service.

Teams comprise individuals with complementary knowledge that can far exceed that of a single person. Team members are also able to coordinate their efforts to produce the desired outcome on schedule and on budget.

Through specialist teams and steering committees departments can combine their knowledge to take an active role in company-wide and strategic–level decisions. This helps these divisions and departments to feel they have some “ownership” of the decisions made when the board acts upon these recommendations.

This “ownership” reinforces the organizational community feeling. This community sentiment permeates throughout the organization and is often the motivation for calling a group of people a team. An example of this is a Customer Support Team where individuals share the same set of skills and all do exactly the same job, thus having a collective expertise within the team.

By creating this type of team environment, the morale of both the individual and the workplace is boosted. This does not mean that all groups of people performing the same role are referred to as a team, (e.g. the accounts department), but they have their group identity, and morale is based on their department’s contribution to the organization.

SUMMARY

* A team is a group of people who share a common understanding of their mission and work together to accomplish it.
* Teams can be temporary or permanent.
* Properly managed and motivated teams will have a significant advantage in achieving their goals.
* Teams bring several benefits to organisations, such as:
* Greater levels and depth of expertise
* More productive than individuals
* Able to deliver large projects successfully
* Build a workplace community, thus boosting morale.

Bruce Tuckman’s “Stages Of A Group”

Much of the theory of team building is based on academic research and has its roots both in psychology and sociology. It began with the work of Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920), who is credited as the founder of experimental psychology. It was Kurt Lewin (1890-1947), a social psychologist, who coined the term “group dynamics” to describe the positive and negative forces between groups of people.

In 1945, Lewin established the Group Dynamics Research Centre at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the first institute devoted explicitly to the study of group dynamics and how it could be applied to real world social issues.

As research continued in this area throughout the second half of the twentieth century its focus moved more into studying how group performance could be improved in the workplace.

One of the most influential studies in this area is Bruce Tuckman’s (1965). He proposed a four-staged model called: “Tuckman’s Stages for a Group”, which states that the ideal group decision making process should occur in four stages:

1. Forming
2. Storming
3. Norming
4. Performing

Tuckman maintained that these phases are all necessary and inevitable for the team to grow, to face up to challenges, to tackle problems, to find solutions, to plan work and to deliver results.

This model has become the basis for subsequent models and it is important to understand the process of each stage and its concepts so that they can be applied to the workplace.

***Stage 1 – Forming***

This first stage involves the bringing together of a group of individuals to form a team. At this stage, members usually have positive expectations about the venture, although they may harbor some anxiety about other members, such as who they are and what they are like.

At this point it is about building relationships within the group and clarifying the team’s mission. Initially individuals behave independently of each other, but as they gather information and impressions about:

* each other
* the scope of the task
* its challenges and opportunities and
* how to approach it

the team members begin to agree on goals and tackle particular tasks.

Each individual’s behavior is driven by their desire to be accepted by the other team members and avoid conflict. This results in serious issues being avoided or put off, as team members concentrate on non-contentious or routine issues.

This reluctance to engage in and resolve areas of conflict means that the team accomplishes very little and the underlying differences which have been brushed aside will eventually surfaced and have to be addressed.

The length of this first stage will depend on how clearly the task is defined and on how much experience the members have of working as a team. Groups with simple tasks will move through orientation quickly, but groups with more complex goals and tasks may spend much longer in this stage.

Teams made up of people who are used to being autonomous will take longer to build the necessary relationships for a successful team than those used to working in a team. Many individuals may be reluctant to contribute at this stage and their support by a leader is given cautiously.

The leader needs to be very hands-on at this stage, giving clear directions and structure to ensure that the team build strong relationships. The leader can facilitate this by making sure the communications dispel any misunderstandings that could arise about roles and responsibilities.

With decisions being made in the majority of cases by the nominated leader, one issue which needs to be ensured is that no team member is committing themselves to do too much, or too little, of the planned work.

By paying attention from the outset to building good relationships, as well as focusing on a clearly defined task, the team will perform better than teams whose leaders skip through on skip over the relationship-building stage.

***Stage 2 – Storming***

During this second stage, where team members feel more able to express and question opinions, more evidence of internal conflict comes to surface. The leader’s role is to contain and direct this energy into a productive channel. The leader needs to be aware that some level of internal conflict will cause a simultaneous dip in team morale. The leader’s role will have to become more supportive guiding the team to their decision-making and offering explanations of how these decisions came about. The leader needs to define what he/she and the organization expect of the team in terms of professional behavior.

This more instructional approach will enable, especially the leader, to prevent any conflict from getting out of control and poisoning relationships among the team’s members.

It is easy to recognize when a team moves into the “storming” stage, because the members begin to address the differences between their initial perceptions and the reality of the situation that they have been formed to address. This will cover issues such as what problems they are really supposed to solve, how they will function independently and together and what model of leadership they will accept.

As team members begin to negotiate work assignments and express their views on the best way to achieve the task outcome, disagreements will arise. Through active listening skills the leader will mediate and help decisions to be made through compromise as the most efficient way to attain the necessary outcomes.

While team members confront each other’s ideas, test differing perspectives, discuss what the team have to do, and how it is best to accomplish it, the leader’s role becomes one of a facilitator building trust within sub-groups of the team.

Team storming, whilst it may be contentious and unpleasant, will be resolved relatively quickly, with a leader’s guidance and support. It is a necessary step for a team to become a cohesive whole and not as an enormous irritation to be dismissed.

At this stage members may:

* Find it painful because they are averse to conflict
* Feel anger or frustration with the task or with other members.
* Resent the presence of formal leadership.
* Focus on minutiae to avoid the real issues confronting the team.

The maturity in terms of attitude and approach to problem resolution of some team members can be significant in determining whether the team will ever move out of this stage.

If there are attempts to bulldoze through this stage in a team’s development (by the leader, for instance), this stage may become a permanent state, resulting in low morale and lack of productivity. If it is feared that this is happening in a team, it is advisable to consider the range of flexibility offered by the organisation’s constraints, so as to alter the composition of the team.

Another option would be to break the team into smaller subjects of cohesive individuals within the team so that morale and productivity are raised.

***Stage 3 – Norming***

Once the team has reached the third stage of its development the members focus on resolving differences so that the goals and the mission can be clearly defined. The role of the leader now shifts to that of a team member.

Team members learn more about each other and how they will work together and are developing tools such as a problem solving process, a code of conduct, a set of team values and measurement indicators. The team has now established core processes and the leader has to ensure the team avoids spending unnecessary time on issues related to the smaller processes.

During this period of negotiation and discussion, the leader’s role becomes that of an observer and facilitator in order to assist the team in establishing the ground rules of behavior as they learn to work together. Their attitudes are characterized by decreasing animosities toward other members; feelings of cohesion, mutual respect, harmony and trust; and a feeling of contentment in accomplishing tasks.

The team is truly developing in terms of team pride and there is evidence of increased productivity as skills develop. The team arrive at decisions that are more in line with their purpose rather than from a position of compromise.

The leader transforms their role as coach to that of a delegator and mentor offering the team greater opportunities to raise their levels of expertise.

***Stage 4 - Performing***

Now the team has reached the final stage of its development and can now bring real benefits to the organization. The team members are now competent, autonomous and able to handle the decision- making process without supervision.

The team have been accomplishing tasks throughout all the stages, but it is now in the “performing” stage, that work is accomplished more effectively. Morale is high and the general atmosphere is positive. Team members’ attitudes are characterized by positive feelings and eagerness to be a part of the team.

Members are confident about the outcome, enjoy open communication, exhibit high energy and disagreement is expected and allowed as long as it is channeled through means

acceptable to the team. Leadership within the team is often shared and tasks are delegated within the team, which makes the overall decision-making process operate more easily than at earlier stages.

Once the team is operating at this level then the leader’s role becomes one of overseer and delegator. The leader is no longer involved in day-to-day activities and the team’s relationships with each other emulate the high degree of trust and loyalty the leader shows in his/her relationship with the team.

Another key task a leader should perform at this stage is one of monitoring the team’s relationships and performance to ensure that the group dynamics remain positive and productive. This is because changes in the dynamics of the group can result in high-performing teams reverting to earlier team-building stages.

For example, a change in leadership may cause the team to revert to ‘storming’ as the new people challenge the existing norms and dynamics of the team.

Whilst Tuckman’s model has been extremely influential in terms of improving peoples’ understanding of how group dynamics change as a team becomes a cohesive group, it is not readily transferable to the world of work.

In the more than fifty years since Tuckman’s research many others have related group dynamics to the place of work. It is the model of J. Richard Hackman that is frequently referred to when one is responsible for designing and managing work groups.

Richard Hackman’s ‘Five Factor Model’

In 2002, whilst working at Harvard, Richard Hackman developed a research-based model for designing and managing work groups.

His research looked at why some groups were successful and what it was that made them so. He identified three attributes that such groups possessed:

● They satisfy internal and external clients.

●They develop capabilities to perform in the future.

●The members find meaning and satisfaction within the group.

He then went on to identify the conditions that can increase the chances of success for teams. This, he called his ‘Five Factor Model.’

Those five factors are:

1. Being a Real Team

2. Compelling Direction

3. Enabling Structure

4. Supportive Context

5. Expert Coaching

These phrases need to be defined so that one can see how

they can influence the success of a team. What is needed therefore, is to ensure these elements exist within the environment of an organisation’s department.

***Factor 1—Being a Real Team***

What does Hackman mean by ‘being a real team’? The elements he said were required to ensure your team is ‘a real team’ are: the members have a shared task, the team boundaries clearly state who is inside or outside of the group, and the group membership is stable.

A leader will have direct control over the first two elements of what constitutes ‘a real team’, but it is the stability of the group members that is often the hardest aspect to control. If leadership is based in a project-type environment then it is probable that team stability will last only as long as the project. If the team includes someone with a rare skill, even this level of stability may not be possible, as different project teams may vie for this scarce resource.

Instability within the team composition can also arise from the nature of the work. For example, leading within a call center environment is often plagued by a high rate of staff turnover due to the nature of the job and the fact that it often attracts transient individuals.

A leader in this type of environment will have to be able to minimize the inevitable disruption of staff turnover by developing an induction program that quickly integrates new recruits into the team.

***Factor 2—Compelling Direction***

The second factor of this model is that of providing the team with a compelling direction. This means that a team should have clear goals, which are both challenging and consequential.

Whatever type of team there is, there must be direct control over the goals set to the team. It should be ensured that SMART goals need to be motivating and rewarding for the team members. These goals need to clearly state how the team contributes to the organization so that the team is aware of their own contribution to the overall mission.

***Factor 3—Enabling Structure***

The structure that a team exists in is the third factor that Hackman cites as influential in making a team a success. Some of these aspects are controlled over by the leader, while others

are going to be dictated by the type of organization you are in and your role within it.

Where possible, offering a team variety in the tasks they must complete improves the team’s success. Examples might include small changes in task assignment if the team is a call center team, or keeping the size of the team at a manageable level so that they are not too large and become unwieldy. Sometimes making small sub-groups within a large team so that the qualities of successful teams can be nurtured is useful.

Within a team’s structure it is imperative to ensure that some of the key players have good social skills. This makes certain that persuasion and well-presented arguments rather than conflict forms the basis for decision making within the team. These social skills will also ensure that behavior is guided by strong norms.

***Factor 4—Supportive Context***

The fourth quality required to ensure successful teams is that of support. A supportive context is essential for companies and organizations, as they are made up of small groups which when combined form a larger group.

This support framework is made up of three elements: reward, development, and information. The reward must be linked to the performance of the group or team. This system must be based upon rewarding the group’s performance and cooperation.

The second element of the support must be the development of individual members’ skills through an educational system. For many organizations this educational system is formed around the Appraisal System, and it is a leader’s responsibility to develop skills in this area.

The third supportive element is connected to the provision of information and guaranteeing easy access to this data and materials. A team ought to have access to the information and materials they need to develop their own skills. Team members can take advantage of the advances in communications technology (computers, notebooks, eBook readers, and smartphones, etc.) and the Internet.

***Factor 5—Expert Coaching***

This guidance leads into the final aspect of the Five Factor Model, that of expert coaching and mentoring. Through the Annual Appraisal system and day-to-day work of the team it can be identified which members of the team require help with a task, or how that individual can be coached to develop their interpersonal skills. Once this need has been identified the person is coached in how they can best meet this challenge and develop the skills they lack. The manner should not be too overbearing, as this can seriously undermine the effectiveness of the team. The latter is a criticism that Hackman draws attention to in his research and it will significantly reduce the success of any team. Hackman has been publishing work on teams since1967 and his work in this area remains highly regarded.

Most teams encountered in the working world are likely to exhibit a mix of Tuckman’s Four Stages and Hackman’s Five Factor Model in their day-to-day operations.

By understanding the group dynamics of a team we are better able to adapt leadership styles and behaviors to suit any current team. We will encounter teams that are an almost permanent fixture, but in which individual members may come and go. Any new members are integrated into the pre-existing team as quickly as possible. This enables the team to continue to operate most effectively.

Other teams are more temporary in nature, often set up for a specific project. Frequently this type of team will be made up of individuals who are familiar with and have a great deal of experience of working in teams.

This type of team must be a cohesive unit as they are likely to be very clear about each other’s responsibilities. This means that the forming and storming stages will be more quickly resolved as the whole team is focused on its objective.

It is inevitable that at some point we will come across a dysfunctional team that is locked into the storming stage and is unwilling to progress no matter what. In some instances the only way to handle such a team is to create sub-teams within this group so that each can work effectively and productively. The team environment should be conducive to the attainment of goals and that sufficient support is available to individuals, with the addition of coaching expertise as and when required.

***Key points***

Tuckman’s four-stage model states that the ideal group decision-making process should occur in four stages:

* forming,
* storming,
* norming, and
* performing.

We can use this four-stage model to assist ourselves in clearly identifying the group dynamics of a team.

* The four-stage model provides a framework for how a team can best interact.
* Hackman’s model suggests that groups are successful when they:
* Satisfy internal and external clients,
* Develop capabilities to perform in the future, and
* Provide meaning and satisfaction in the group.
* Setting to a team and its members SMART goals will ensure that they have a clear focus for their activities.
* Developing an appraisal system will ensure an appropriate team structure and provide a supportive environment in which a team can develop their own skills.

Summary

Team working provides a wide variety of benefits to organizations from bringing together diverse expertise to building a workplace community. This makes it very difficult to generalize about teams as even within the same organization there will be teams that have very little in common. The best management style for any particular team will be influenced by its purpose and composition. This means that each piece of team building or team management advice should be thought about very carefully. Team members need to ask themselves, under what conditions would this be helpful, be of limited use, or be completely inappropriate?

Remember, well managed, well- coordinated and motivated teams will have a significant correlation with the success of the outcomes of any project. Cooperation, respect, trust and a mutual understanding of the common goal all members of the team serve, will contribute significantly to fulfilling the final outcome which initially began as mere aspirations. Successful teams bring about excellent results in any workplace.