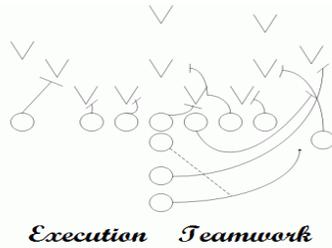


Teams in the Not for Profit Environment



Work teams, project teams, research teams, treatment teams, etc... Teams seem to be everywhere. However, high functioning teams are not. What, exactly, is a team? What makes a team work well? How might teams be different in the non-profit arena when compared to the for-profit setting? Let's begin with some basics.

What Is a Team?

According to Moore, "A team is made up of two or more people working interdependently towards a common goal and shared reward." (Moore, 275) One can quickly see the importance of the word "interdependently". If that word is removed from the definition, it can have an entirely different meaning. It is that interdependence along with the goal orientation that helps define the difference between a group and a team. Moore does not stop there. He outlines the difference between "teamthink" and "groupthink" as follows:

"...evidence of teamthink emerges (in)

- *the expression of divergent views;*
- *expression of concern; and,*
- *an awareness of limitations, etc.*

Prior to this, the group (not yet a team) is characterised by evidence of groupthink:

- *Individuals within the group display considerable effort in trying to agree with one another; and,*
- *Any attempts to adequately discuss alternative solutions, etc. are suppressed" (Moore, 89-90)*

In other words, groups in general put a heavier emphasis on and invest more resources into maintaining conformity among their members (Moore, 89), while teams emphasize finding solutions and achieving goals. If you have read and understood the “The Abilene Paradox” (Smiley, 1982), you will recognize groupthink.

Basic Team Development

Tuckman long ago identified the basic phases of the team development process as “forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning” (Edison, 14). A team comes together, struggles to sort itself out, sets its purpose and ground rules, does the job, and then adjourns. Of course, it is not quite that simple. Lots of things can go wrong. Teams can move back and forth between phases, or become fixated in a stage of development. Essentially though, Tuckman provided a good description of how things work – when they do manage to work.

The process of team development can be affected by many factors. Among these are:

- Team composition: Is the team heterogeneous? Homogeneous?
- Team structure: Is it a hierarchical team? Short term project team? Is stable team membership assured? Are the members drawn from different departments?
- Organizational culture and structure: The organization will often set the tone and rules for the team’s development and functioning.
- Team geography: Is the team co-located or geographically distributed? If distributed, how are they connected? Are more members in one place than another? Are some at the corporate headquarters while others are “remote”, “out of state”, or in a “foreign country”? (Those terms are pet peeves of this author because they can be evidence of ego-centricity in their speakers.)
- Team rewards: How will incentives be provided? Some approaches to providing rewards or sanctions can be highly destructive, even to teams that have been high functioning.

The last of the very basic elements is to be clear about what one is judging. Are we trying to establish which group of people is the better team? Or are we asking which group has the better team dynamics? What is the difference?

One can take a group of nationally recognized experts and put them into a situation where they manage to function well enough as a team to come up with a great solution.

That might be the best team in terms of its results, but its performance is based more on the knowledge each brought to the problem to begin with than it is on their performance while they worked together.

On the other hand, a group of people with a far more shallow level of expertise can come together and form a sentient team utilizing sapiential authority (i.e.- based in skill or knowledge, rather than title or position in an organization. Leadership can move around the room). If this group manages to put every ounce of ability each other possesses into action and synergistically arrive at a very good solution – one that might never have occurred to any of them if they had not been in such a dynamic team – then this team had the better team dynamics.

In short, while the first group might get credit for being the better team, the second had better teamwork. The primary focus of this article is the teamwork. It is more about the “how” they work together, and less about the “what” each knew before he or she became a part of the team. Of course, it is best to have both, but having the top experts in any given field(s) sit together is seldom an option that arises for any length of time. This article is about how to get the most out of what we have.

Beyond the Basics

There is much to examine beyond the basics. Sometimes the above-mentioned items might all be acknowledged & addressed, but the teams still do not produce much synergy. Others, even with very little support, might develop to a point where they take on a sentience all their own. The latter can become a sort of super team, generating an intelligence, strength, and energy far exceeding the sum of their parts.

There are a number of factors critical to such success. This article will focus on one particular element in which non-profits often have an edge: mission.

Of course for-profit companies create mission statements too, but this is generally a bit different. The underlying mission of most non-profits is usually something altruistic: to heal the sick, prevent child abuse, preserve history, make art available to all, provide education, etc. – in effect, to do good. The underlying mission of for-profits is just what the label implies: financial profit, a rather banal ultimate goal. Thus, nonprofits should generally have an easier time putting together a mission statement that everyone can

get behind. Considering that people often choose to work at a particular nonprofit because of its mission, it is a natural fit.

An organization's mission is a superordinate goal and ***"The construct superordinate goals, in particular, was found to have a powerful effect on both the attainment of cooperation and perceived task outcomes"*** (Pinto, Pinto, and Prescott, 1295) in cross-functional teams.

It is the importance of superordinate goals that prompted this article to be written. That is, this writer has observed some nonprofits abandon their reasons for existence as they fight for that very existence in this poor economy. As funds have become more difficult to obtain, they have lost sight of their mission (one might say they've lost their vision statements as they have lost that sight) and are simply chasing money. The mantra "No margin, no mission" began to trump all else. This is a mistake. We are throwing away one of our greatest advantages in many ways, not the least of which is in team building.

In the mission vs. margin dichotomy one cannot be allowed to entirely dominate the other. Rather, it should be

"...a healthy tension we welcome and embrace. This relationship is often described as a dance, with each one being a significant and key partner. The question for those of us in leadership is 'Who is leading the dance?' This question tests for us how authentically we preserve our reason for being." (Hales, 8)

The mission frames everything the team does. Without that framework, people are invited to work at cross purposes. Mirage projects can arise. In the absence of a superordinate goal individual team members have been known to assume or construct their own goals and objectives. Those might or might not be consistent with the mission, vision, and strategic objectives of the nonprofit. Perhaps worst of all, secrets might be kept. It is a fact that secrets split teams and people working at cross purposes or for their own personal agendas often keep secrets. Such behavior is encouraged when a clear mission is not a central element to the team's charter.

If one does not value Hales' words or those of this article's author on this topic, then maybe one of the best management experts in history will carry more weight. In his book "Managing the Non-Profit Organization" Peter F. Drucker wrote:

- "a non-profit institution that becomes a prisoner of money-raising is in serious trouble and in a serious identity crisis" (Drucker, 56);
- "Fund development is creating a constituency which supports the organization because it *deserves* it" (Drucker, 56);
- "A mission statement must focus on what the institution really tries to do and then do it so that everybody in the organization can say, 'This is *my* contribution to the goal'" (Drucker, 4); and,
- "I have never seen anything being done well unless people were committed" (Drucker, 7)

And finally, if you do not believe Drucker, there is another great writer to consider as you evaluate the importance of mission vs. margin as it relates to the functioning of your teams. If you do not ensure your people are aware of and dedicated to your mission to do good as they undertake their roles, the team will be...

but a walking shadow, a poor player,

That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,

And then is heard no more. It is a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,

Signifying nothing.

Macbeth, Act 5, Scene 5

That Bill Shakespeare guy knew his stuff about the importance of having a higher purpose, huh?

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