



## Variables in teams

Surprisingly little has been written about leadership in the particular context of teams, yet leadership in teams is of paramount importance. The quality of leadership is likely to affect both the efficiency and effectiveness of a team. Effective leadership can provide motivation, task and goal clarification and prompt and appropriate feedback. While there is a wealth of written material on leadership, little focusses on leadership within teams.

Why, then, do these two important areas of research (leadership and team functioning) fail to address this important issue? One major reason is the multiplicity of variables at work in teams. This makes it particularly difficult to focus on just one, for example leadership. Furthermore, theories on what constitutes effective leadership are rarely conclusive. Traditionally, leadership was seen as a team role performed by one person. With increasing emphasis on participation, empowerment and de-centralization of decision making, it is perhaps more appropriate to consider “distributed leadership”. Rather than leadership residing in one person, a team or shared approach might be adopted. However, distributed leadership is even more difficult to study. These obstacles account, in part, for this omission in the research.

Popular writings on the topic suggest that teams are easy to form, straightforward to manage and largely capable of producing both efficient and effective outcomes. However, the reality is very different. Some of the common problems include slow decision making, role conflict, unclear goals and negative synergy. Other potential disadvantages surround the increased costs often associated with team decisions. While “many hands make light work”, there is evidence that team members ease off in some circumstances in the belief that the rest of the team will carry them. This concept is known as social loafing. Moreover, two heads may be better than one, but the quality of team decisions is likely to be less than that of the best individual team member (it is however likely to be better than that of the average team member<sup>(1)</sup>).

## Potential benefits

Clearly there are many potential benefits from teamworking. These are encapsulated by the term synergy, alternatively known as the team concept. Synergy is defined as the whole being greater than the sum of the individual parts. Frequent interaction between members can improve the focus of the team, clarifying objectives and roles. Different skills and perspectives can be brought together to enhance the division of labor. Individual behaviors

## Complementary management approaches

become energized and directed toward team goals. The opportunities for mutual positive re-inforcement increase, along with shared responsibilities and vision. Perhaps the greatest benefit lies in the building of self-esteem within individual members, and the generation of *esprit de corps*.

A team leader tries to maximize the potential benefits from teamworking, while minimizing the weaknesses. This process necessarily starts with awareness. Leaders need to be aware of the purpose of the team and the key roles to be performed in it. The next difficult task is to recruit the right people to the right roles. Given this foundation, the role of leadership then becomes more dynamic. Observation, analysis, sensitivity and timely intervention are some of the necessary skills for getting the best out of teams. Teamworking abilities and team leadership skills are unlikely to abound naturally, they need to be developed and managed.

Put simply, a team is a finely-tuned group. For it to be a successful team, the leadership and management of it has to be fine-tuned too. We propose three complementary management approaches which are designed to improve both the efficiency and effectiveness of teams:

- (1) Managing – objectives, roles and performance monitoring;
- (2) Coaching – managing day-to-day interactions and processes;
- (3) Leading – the long-term strategic view.

Whether these roles reside exclusively in one person, or are distributed across the team, is an important issue. The potential advantages from the application of division of labor to leadership, might well justify different people taking responsibility for each of the three complementary approaches.

### **Managing**

Managing the team focusses on team members' roles, team structures and goal setting. Significant communication is required to ensure that commonality of purpose is both recognized and worked toward. Feedback to members is particularly important.

Many of the principle tasks of team manager are similar to the typical tasks performed by managers in a general sense. For a thorough discussion of these, see Mintzberg<sup>(2)</sup>, Handy<sup>(3)</sup>, Kotter *et al.*<sup>(4)</sup>. Within a team, task and social roles need to be identified, clarified and continually re-iterated both to the individual concerned and to other members of the team. The manager must stress the importance of each role and therefore each team player.

## Clear, shared objectives

The formulation and statement of *clear, shared objectives* and the differentiation of these into tasks, is a key managerial role. Where individual goals, team goals and organizational goals are congruent, the chances of team effectiveness increase substantially. Team effectiveness is also more likely where tasks are intrinsically interesting, and commitment and cohesion are present. Once goals are attained, a role of management is to *feed performance information* back to the team. Areas found to be problematic or unsuccessful can then be identified. The manager and the team are then able to concentrate on these areas on a management by exception basis.

## Mis-managing in primary health-care teams

*Clarification of roles and individual goals* can be supplemented by making team structures explicit. Every team member needs to be aware of the lines of responsibility, communication and authority. Conflict is an inevitable possibility within a team, but a clear team structure should minimize this and help resolve it if it arises.

One form of team that most people encounter occasionally is the primary health-care team, charged with promoting the health of the local population. Using a measure of team functioning called the Team Climate Inventory<sup>(5)</sup>, the functioning of primary health-care teams was compared with that of other teams, including oil company management teams, NHS hospital management teams, social services teams and community psychiatry teams<sup>(6)</sup>. Primary health-care teams were found to be significantly less clear about their team objectives than any of the other teams. Moreover, an examination of their management revealed diverse lines of management with competing objectives. The management of primary care calls out for integrated management rather than diverse lines of accountability to general practitioners, midwifery managers, health visiting managers, district nurse managers, and Family Health Service Authorities<sup>(6)</sup>.

In conclusion, one of the most important jobs in team management is to continually focus on the efficiency and effectiveness of the team, i.e. doing things right, and doing the right things. Argyris<sup>(7)</sup> has coined the term “double-loop learning” to describe the regular cycle of reviewing team objectives, methods, structures and processes. This cycle of “reflexivity” should also consider soft as well as hard measures, e.g. assessing relationships within the team as well as the measurement of performance against targets.

## Coaching

*Coaching* is to do with the facilitation and management of day-to-day team processes. It involves a more internal and informal team process role, and requires supportive communication, including a heavy emphasis on active listening. Guidance, support and suggestions to team members are key factors in the continual cycle of coaching.

Coaching is primarily a facilitation role, supporting, guiding and encouraging members to discover for themselves ways of improving performance. As day-to-day skills, coaching skills are predominantly communications oriented, with an emphasis on active listening and re-statement of the issues as perceived.

*Active listening* is about making sufficient effort to ensure that the message is both heard and understood, and that the interpersonal relationship involved is enhanced. For an excellent discussion of supportive communication see Whetten and Cameron<sup>(8)</sup>.

*Reflective listening* is a very significant form of coaching behavior. By listening very carefully to what is said, re-stating a paraphrased version and then seeking clarification or otherwise from the sender, both empathy and understanding can be improved.

*Recognizing and revealing feelings* involves the coach being able to talk openly and honestly about a wide range of factors which might be affecting

team performance. The ability to present about one's self and seek out from others both positive and negative effects will reveal a level of intimacy required to ensure that skeletons are not being kept in the cupboard. This is a particularly sensitive role of the team coach.

*Positive feedback* – even praising small improvements – is a powerful way of changing and strengthening behavior. The coach needs to be on hand to deliver this at the time of the commendable action. All too often it occurs far too late, e.g. at the annual appraisal, and removed from the “stimulus” event. When behaviors match with expectations and objectives, positive feedback can be powerful communication and a good motivator.

## The value of coaching in teams

We recently were asked to work with a management team from a national voluntary organization which was experiencing such major problems in its functioning that personal relationships had come close to breaking down. We worked with the team over a two-day period and observed repeated patterns of spiralling conflict. The team manager in particular seemed threatened by members of the team, particularly their suggestions for innovations – though the difficulties were by no means confined to him. We coached the team in using coaching skills over the two days, focussing particularly on the skills of listening and reflection. By the end of the workshop, the team had developed some insight into its failure to listen to one another and to take time out to understand one another's positions before aggressively forwarding their own. Targets of coaching behavior over the following six months were set and the team agreed to meet for a further workshop at the end of that time. In the follow-up workshop the team indicated greater effectiveness in every area of team performance and moreover reported and showed that it was now using the coaching skills to good effect. The team manager in particular had achieved a major change in his capacity to listen to and understand the positions of team members.

### **Team leadership**

Leadership, as distinct from managing and coaching, is the process of making appropriate strategic interventions in order to give direction and motivation to the team. The team leader needs intuition, fine judgment and the ability to assess and manage risk. Undoubtedly, external confidence and charisma are other aspects leadership can bring to the team.

## The functions of a leader

Leading a team is about providing a long-term strategic approach. It requires the ability to see goals clearly and supply the vision which enables other team members to see where the team is going. Leadership is a macro-level concept, which seeks to ensure that synergy, motivation and success are created in the team.

Extensive research by Hackman<sup>(9)</sup> suggests there are three main functions of a team leader. The first concerns the creation of favorable performance conditions (winning resources, support and clarifying organizational objectives) for the team, often through the use of influence and networking. Second, the team must be built as a performing unit, being of the right size and comprising an appropriate mix of skills and abilities. Third, Hackman argues, leaders need an on-going sensitivity to patterns of interaction and processes of performance within the team.

## What to avoid

Undoubtedly leadership is a difficult role to fulfill effectively and consistently since it requires the use of intuitive skills. In developing and using such skills, Hackman argues there are five trip-wires to be avoided.

- (1) Calling the performing unit a team, but managing members as individuals. The use of individual performance appraisal and individual rewards can be divisive in team functioning.
- (2) Falling off the authority balance beam. Leaders have to determine when to use power and when to create autonomy. They need to decide when to intervene and when to leave things alone. Effective leadership involves achieving a delicate balance between when and when not to intervene.
- (3) Assembling a large group of people but not being specific about three important elements. The task of the team must be explicit; the parameters of the team's activities clear; and the size of the team must be kept appropriate. There is evidence to suggest that as team size increases, effectiveness generally decreases.
- (4) Specifying challenging objectives for the team, but providing insufficient organizational support. Leadership involves the acquisition of resources for the team. These include the provision of appropriate data, a suitable education/training system for the development of skills and knowledge, and the supply of material resources such as rooms, computing equipment, etc.
- (5) Assuming team members are already equipped as team players. Leading involves timely intervention and constant awareness of the processes in the team. An effective leader accepts a key role in helping team players through both successful times and periods of difficulty.

## Leading and mis-leading in teams

One of the commonest errors of managers taking responsibility for a new team is to assume that democratic participative management involves giving a team a broad outline of the task and leaving them to it. Others make the mistake of covering their uncertainty about managing teams by being overly autocratic and authoritarian. In a research team we studied, the manager initially tried a strategy of giving the young members of the research team almost total responsibility for a major project. The researchers became anxious and de-motivated out of a foreboding of failure. Eventually, the manager did give clear and authoritative guidance, but at the expense of being seen to be relatively directive in a way inconsistent with his previous style. Consequently, morale improved slowly, but not before one member of the research team left in disillusionment. Here was a clear example of a manager specifying challenging objectives but then abandoning the team to fend for itself.

In another case, a health-care team had a new assistant manager brought in to manage the day-to-day functioning of the team. Most of the team was senior and comprised experienced professionals, whereas the manager was rather young. Apparently in an attempt to compensate for her lack of experience she adopted a highly directive and abrasive style. This produced a great deal of conflict and frustration among team members. In a courageous attempt to deal with the problems, the assistant manager set up a two-day workshop with outside facilitators where the problems were addressed. One year later the team was functioning much more effectively and the team manager was much more relaxed in her work. In this case the

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assistant team manager had apparently fallen off the authority balance beam with potentially disastrous consequences in terms of team performance.

In summary, a team offers a way of working with which many are unfamiliar. To manage a team efficiently and effectively is much more difficult than is imagined. Structures and systems formed to manage individuals and departments may well be inappropriate for teams. The outcome is that the many possible benefits of teamwork may not be realized. Without sufficient and appropriate leadership, residing in either one person or distributed across several members, teams are unlikely to offer significant improvements over more traditional ways of working. The systematic assessment of the effectiveness of team working is sadly lacking. To compound this, there are many potential snags facing team leaders, ranging from inadequate selection techniques to insufficient clarification of team goals and objectives. In our experience, a lack of managerial skill in the area of team management and/or inappropriate use of managerial style is a major problem in many organizations. The development of managing, coaching and leading skills in the context of teams is therefore a major challenge facing today's managers.

### References

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### Further reading

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