Planning to use work teams effectively

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Abstract

Few studies have definitively established a clear connection between teaming and higher performance, and even fewer have quantitatively assessed the impact of teaming on corporate performance. If using work teams is not a guarantee of greater effectiveness, then the challenge becomes one of creating an environment that increases the likelihood that teams will be successful. This article presents a work team planning guide that identifies the critical issues and topics that organizations should consider when planning to use work teams effectively. Primary research, training and development experience, and an integration of team-based literature all contribute to the ideas presented here.

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When considering the many ways that companies are organized to conduct work, it should come as no surprise to find a high reliance on teams. Whether this involves managers assigned to self-managed teams or shop-floor workers participating in self-directed teams, a group approach to work has become an integral part of the formal structure at most organizations. A recent study involving 172 US manufacturing firms examined the organizational design features these firms rely on when pursuing various supply-chain objectives. While only six of the 29 design features evaluated by respondents involved teams, three of the seven most widely used features were team related. The study concluded that the use of teams remains a popular and growing design option among firms (Trent, 2003).

While we have witnessed an increased reliance on work teams over the last 25 years, not all observers agree that the use of teams is a guarantee of greater organizational effectiveness. Social psychologist Renesis Likert once wrote that groups can accomplish much that is good, or they can do great harm. He noted there is nothing implicitly good or bad, weak or strong, about groups, regardless of where an organization uses them (Likert, 1961). J. Richard Hackman, a leading authority on work teams, has argued that while teams can yield the benefits envisioned by their use, they often have a less-than-desirable side. They can waste the time and energy of members, enforce lower performance norms, create destructive conflict within and between teams, and make notoriously bad decisions. Teams can also exploit, stress, and frustrate members – sometimes all at the same time (Hackman, 1987).

Adding to the debate between teams and effectiveness is the fact that few studies have established a clear connection between teaming and higher performance, and even fewer have quantitatively assessed the impact of teaming on corporate performance (Wisner and Feist, 2001). We know that high-performing teams, in theory, should provide benefits that far outweigh their cost. Conversely, we also know that poorly designed teams can create serious organizational stress.

If we believe that using work teams does not guarantee greater effectiveness, then the challenge becomes one of creating an

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environment that increases the likelihood that teams will be successful. Much of the success or failure of teams rests on an organization's ability to plan, structure, and support their use. Perhaps more than ever, a growing reliance on work teams requires careful planning by team builders to ensure that the reality of using teams matches the expectations surrounding their use.

This article discusses the critical issues and topics that organizations should consider when planning to use work teams. Extensive research with hundreds of teams and dozens of companies, learning gained through training and development, and a thorough review and integration of team-based research have all contributed to the planning topics and conclusions presented here.

Critical work team planning issues

Planning is a fundamental part of a broader process called teaming. The first phase of teaming requires a careful examination of a wide array of issues and topics when planning to use work teams. After forming a team, our focus shifts to team interaction as the team progresses toward its goals. Regular assessment and measurement validate that teams are performing as expected, while maintenance requires an organization to act when required to ensure continued performance. While planning comprises only one phase of teaming, the activities and decisions made during this phase will have a disproportionate affect on the success or failure of team-based efforts.

Effective team planning requires the careful consideration of a wide array of topics, which requires time and discipline. While areas such as total quality management and negotiation recognize the importance of planning, minimal discussion has formally addressed planning within a teaming process. In an attempt to overcome this shortcoming Figure 1 presents a work team planning guide which highlights the topics and questions that team builders should consider when planning to use work teams effectively. As mentioned, first-hand research, training and development experience, and an integration of team-based literature all contribute to the ideas presented here. The following sections discuss more fully the items in Figure 1.

Identify appropriate team assignments

While teams will remain popular within organizations, it is simply not the case that all assignments or tasks warrant the use of work teams (Trent, 2003). In fact, teams are often a cost-prohibitive or impractical response to organizational needs. If teams are not always appropriate, when should managers assign teams to a task? While no conclusive rules exist to determine if teams are appropriate, broadly speaking, teams are a good design option when an assignment, project, or task directly supports the attainment of an organization's higher-level objectives. New product development warrants the use of teams, for example, because so many functions are involved in the effort and success or failure affects corporate financial targets.

Teams are also suitable when decisions require buy-in from different functional groups or locations, which is often the case when dealing with organization-wide decisions, policies, and issues. In fact, the need for buy-in is often a reason for forming larger teams. Work teams are also appropriate when organizations face complex or large-scale projects that no single individual, function, or location can manage effectively. Examples include developing a company-wide material handling system or creating worldwide policies or procedures. Teams may also be appropriate if the expected value of a collective decision or output exceeds the cost of using teams.

Selecting appropriate tasks is also important because the nature of the task affects member effort and commitment (Trent, 1998). A higher level of effort is likely to result when the task challenges team members to use a variety of higher-level skills, represents a whole and meaningful piece of work, and supports regular feedback about performance. Team assignments should also have significant consequences on others outside the team while giving members the autonomy or authority for deciding how they will perform their work (Hackman, 1987). Assignments that satisfy these conditions should stimulate rather than impede effort and commitment.

Form work team and select qualified members

Of all the team planning activities, member and leader selection is perhaps the most

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Figure 1 Work team planning guide

	Yes	No
Identify Appropriate Team Assignments		
Do assignments justify the use of teams?	☐	☐
Has the proper team model been identified? (See Figure 2)	☐	☐
Does executive and functional management support the use of a team for the assignment?	☐	☐
Form Work Team and Select Qualified Members and Leader		
Have core versus as-needed members been identified?	☐	☐
Do selected members have the proper skills, time, and commitment to support the work team?	☐	☐
Have team sponsors identified and selected a qualified team leader?	☐	☐
Are customers or suppliers part of the team if required?	☐	☐
Do members understand their formal team roles?	☐	☐
Determine Member Training Requirements		
Have team member training requirements been assessed?	☐	☐
Is required training available on a timely basis?	☐	☐
Identify Resource Requirements		
Are resources provided or available to support the team's task? (See Figure 3)	☐	☐
Determine Team Authority Levels		
Have team authority levels for the team been determined? (See Figure 4)	☐	☐
Have team authority levels been communicated across the organization?	☐	☐
Establish Team Performance Goals		
Has the team established objective performance goals that align with organizational expectations?	☐	☐
Determine How to Measure and Reward Participation and Performance		
Are approaches and systems in place that objectively assess team performance and member contribution?	☐	☐
Do reporting linkages exist to team or executive sponsors?	☐	☐
Is team performance effectively linked to performance reward systems?	☐	☐
Develop Team Charters		
Has a formal charter been developed that details team mission, tasks, broad objectives etc?	☐	☐
Has the charter been communicated across the organization?	☐	☐

critical and involved. At times organizations mistakenly form teams and then search for tasks that appear appropriate for team interaction, a reversal of the proper sequence of events. Organizations must first identify what activities or projects demand attention before determining if work teams are the correct response. Only after determining that a team is appropriate should managers identify the skills and abilities required for the task, which begins to define team size.

Size becomes an issue when the number of members increases beyond a point that allows the effective coordination of activities, although teams that are too small present their own challenges. Members of larger teams report less personal satisfaction from participation, indicate they have less opportunity to influence decisions, and complain of poor coordination of activities (Wicker *et al.*, 1976). As size increases, individual members also have less opportunity to lead with fewer members initiating leadership acts (Stogdill, 1981). Teams should include just enough members to accomplish their task but not more than can be effectively managed (Hackman, 1987).

Deciding who should be part of a team should take place only after identifying the skills and abilities that a task requires. Unfortunately, member selection is often by convenience rather than objective assessment, increasing the possibility that the assembled group is unqualified or incompatible.

When considering who should be part of a team, potential members should satisfy a number of criteria. Perhaps most importantly, members should have knowledge and experience that is relevant to the task at hand along with the time to commit to team activities. Members should also demonstrate a level of interpersonal skill that enables them to work with the mix of individuals assembled within the team. This becomes complicated when forming cross-locational or virtual teams consisting of members who rarely (if ever) meet face to face.

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Members should also have the ability to assume an organizational rather than a narrow functional perspective with no hidden agendas. While it is difficult to determine a priori if team members have ulterior motives or hidden agendas, these agendas, when present, can quickly undermine effectiveness.

Team formation is also the time when organizations should consider the involvement of external others, such as customers or suppliers, who can support team activities. Evidence from earlier research reveals an interesting link between supplier involvement and a variety of desirable outcomes (Trent and Monczka, 1994). Teams with supplier involvement, as formal or informal members, reported greater satisfaction with the exchange of information with suppliers compared with teams that did not include suppliers. These teams also indicated fewer problems coordinating external work activity and reported a higher reliance on suppliers to support the team's goals. Perhaps most importantly, external evaluators rated teams with supplier involvement as demonstrating greater effort and being more effective. While supplier and customer involvement has the potential to promote integration across organizations, the decision to involve external parties creates additional complexity.

A major issue during formation is determining a team's structure or form. While some organizations create teams staffed by full-time members, teams staffed by part-time members present a common yet challenging design option. Organizations that rely on part-time teams typically maintain their existing functional structure while adding team-related duties within a self-managed or cross-functional team environment. Figure 2 presents a 2×2 matrix that segments work teams according to time commitment and task duration.

It can be difficult to obtain commitment from team members who face conflicting demands, which often occurs in the upper half of Figure 2. Part-time members must focus on managing relationships and activities with fellow team members along with others external to the team, such as managers. Consequently, members risk increased burnout because part-time designs require members to have intense and frequent interaction with the team as well as externally with the organization (Elloy *et al.*, 2001).

Competition for a member's time can also lead to conflict. A study involving supply chain teams found that time was the organizational resource that was least available to teams, particularly for part-time team members (Trent and Monczka, 1994). The availability of time, however, was also the resource that correlated most highly with effective teams. Extensive reliance on part-time assignments inherently creates constraints that can affect performance. Defining the structure and form that a team will take requires special attention during planning.

Select qualified team leader(s)

John Zenger, a leading authority on work teams, wrote that years of research and experience with hundreds of companies has led him to conclude that teams without specially trained and skillful leaders run a high risk of failing. He also noted that when asked what they would do differently, most organizations report they should have given much more attention, training, and support to their team leaders. Even when shared leadership within the team is the ultimate goal, the team must still report to someone who, by definition, needs advanced team-leadership skills (Zenger *et al.*, 1994).

The importance of an effective leader should be well appreciated – team leaders strongly affect group effort, cohesion, goal selection, and goal attainment (Likert, 1961). One study found the statistical relationship between leader effectiveness and team effectiveness to be the strongest of any variable studied (Trent, 1996). Unfortunately, few individuals have the qualifications, experience, or training to assume demanding leadership responsibilities. Even if a team does not have a formally identified leader, the probability that a leader will emerge increases as team size increases (Shaw, 1981). The issue becomes whether the emergent leader has the ability to lead effectively. Leader selection, perhaps the most critical of all planning decisions, requires careful consideration.

Determine member training requirements

It is a serious misconception to believe that team members naturally understand how to operate within a team-based environment or have the necessary skill set to be effective in a

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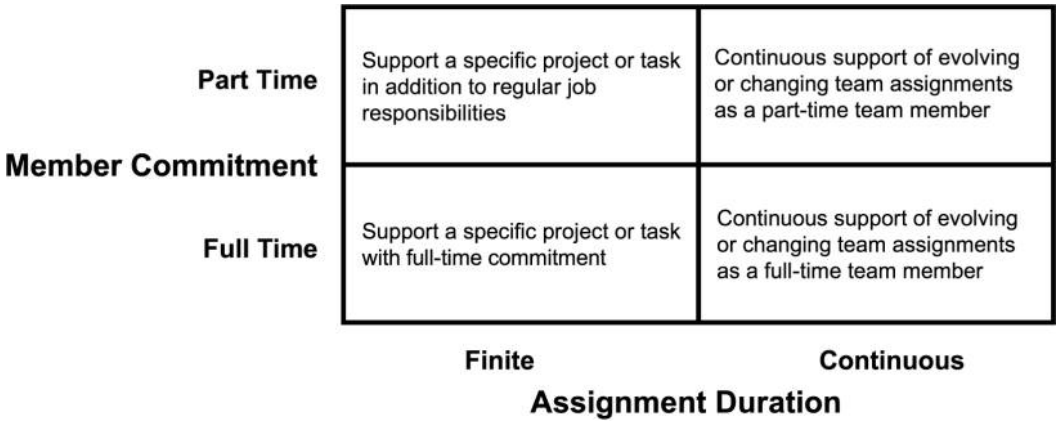
Figure 2 Segmenting work teams



group. An example from a consumer products company illustrates the importance of training for members who may be unqualified to work collectively. This company's executive leadership concluded that the cross-functional team they assembled a year earlier to pursue various improvement opportunities failed to achieve anything of significance. One finding from an external review was that several members admitted they were unable to view issues and tasks beyond their limited functional perspective. They also admitted they did not understand how to work in a cross-functional team. These members view involvement on future teams somewhat skeptically.

Besides the possibility that a member is inexperienced or unprepared for group work, it is simply not our nature in the USA to be group or team focused. In his seminal work on culture, Hofstede concluded that the USA was the most individualistic nation of any studied (Hofstede, 1984). While some cultures place group needs above individual needs, this is usually not the case within the USA. Our culture does not support a group orientation or stress the skills that work best within a group.

Team builders should assess whether employees have the skills to work collectively. Most team members and leaders would benefit from just-in-time training directed at individual knowledge and skill deficiencies. Few organizations, however, evaluate the skill set that team members currently have or will require. Training, when offered, is usually generic and applied to a larger group without considering individual requirements.

Examples of training areas include project management and conflict resolution techniques, creative and critical thinking and analysis, communication and feedback, goal setting, and consensus decision making. While training can occur at any time during the teaming process, proactive organizations assess training and development needs early.

Interestingly, while the idea of consensus is central to team interaction, few members and leaders seem to receive formal training in consensus decision-making techniques[1]. A survey at a 1999 conference involving global team leaders, for example, revealed that no leader had received training related to consensus decision making. A fundamental part of team interaction received minimal attention during planning.

Identify resource requirements

Effective planning also requires a careful assessment of resource requirements. A set of important but often overlooked variables includes the various resources that can promote or interfere with the translation of team member abilities and motivation into effective performance (Peters and O'Connors, 1980). An earlier cited study of cross-functional teams found the statistical relationship between required resources and team effectiveness to be the second highest of any variable studied (Trent and Monczka, 1994). Proper resource commitment has the potential to create an environment that supports high performing teams. On the other hand, insufficient resources can adversely affect performance and cause a team to question management's commitment to work teams as well as the relevancy of teaming.

What resources are most important to work teams? Unfortunately, no set of resources is equally important to every team. The

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resources that a team requires are a function of the team's assignment, which can vary widely. Teams that must travel will find time and budget are critical while teams responsible for developing worldwide service contracts will rely heavily on job-related information. New product development teams will quickly appreciate that help from others outside the team is critical to success. All teams will require access to qualified and prepared team members. Providing teams with the necessary resources reduces the likelihood that performance will suffer because of inattention to this important issue. Figure 3 identifies ten organizational resource categories that teams typically require at some level.

Determine team authority levels

A potential area of conflict when not addressed early concerns a team's operating and decision-making authority. Whether explicitly stated or not, teams usually have varying degrees of authority across four dimensions, which Figure 4 identifies (Monczka and Trent, 1993; Kirkman and Rosen, 1999). The first dimension, scheduling authority, is a lower level of authority that allows a team to schedule meetings without others approving the decision. The second dimension, selection authority, allows a team to select leaders or new members as required. Internal process authority, the third dimension, allows teams to manage internal activities, including budget allocation and goal setting, without management approval. Finally, external decision-making authority allows a team to bind or commit an organization through team decisions. Many teams do not understand the limits placed on their authority because team builders ignore this issue when planning to use teams.

Research suggests that teams with higher levels of internal process authority often realize the performance and process outcomes envisioned by their use (Monzcka and Trent, 1993). Qualified teams should also have external decision-making authority when a task requires decisions rather than recommendations. If the reason to use a team is to improve organizational decision making, then a competent team should have clearly defined internal and external authority. Experience suggests that organizations often grant lower authority levels when initiating the use of teams. As confidence in teaming increases, the types and level of authority granted to teams also increases.

Establish team performance goals

One of the most important activities performed by a team is the establishment of meaningful and quantifiable goals (Barczak

Figure 3 Work team resource categories

Job-Related Information

The information and data required to support team analysis and performance

Materials and Supplies

The routine materials and supplies required to support team activities

Required Help from Others

The services and assistance needed from others external to the team but within the organization

Time Availability

The amount of time that members can commit to team activities

Executive Management Commitment

The overall support that executive management exhibits toward work teams and teaming

Tools and Equipment

The specific tools, equipment, and technology required to support team efforts

Budgetary Support

The financial resources, not including salaries, required to support a team's task

Team Member Task Preparation

The personal preparation and experience of team members as it relates to the team's assignment

Work Environment

The physical aspects of the team's work environment

Customer and Supplier Participation

The support that critical customers and suppliers provide when involvement is beneficial

Source: Adapted from Peters and O'Connors (1980)

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Figure 4 Work team authority dimensions

Scheduling Authority

Ability of a team to schedule its meeting without others approving the decision.

Selection Authority

Ability of a team to select its leader(s) and/or new team members as required to complete assigned tasks.

Internal Authority

Ability of a team to control internal activities, such as allocating budget and material resources to support team activities, determining team performance goals and objectives, making timing decisions regarding the completion of specific activities, and requesting non-team members to support assignments as required.

External Decision-Making Authority

Ability of a team to make decisions that bind or commit an organization. This is conceptually the highest authority dimension because it allows a team to operate independently of external managers.

Source: Adapted from Monczka and Trent (1993, p. 68)

and Wilemon, 2001). While executive managers often establish broad performance objectives when forming teams (for example, reduce the time it takes to satisfy customer orders), teams should be responsible for establishing specific targets, goals, and milestones.

Teams should establish measurable goals for a number of reasons. Research evidence suggests that effort is greater when teams develop and accept challenging goals (Hackman, 1987). An experiment involving US Air Force maintenance groups found that goal setting increased productivity 75 per cent over a pre-established baseline (Pritchard *et al.*, 1988). It is also desirable for teams to develop performance targets because teams often establish more challenging goals than an individual external to the team.

We also know that teams with goals usually perform better than teams requested to perform their best without explicit end goals or targets (Zander, 1980). One reason for this is that members often use their goals as a criterion or benchmark when evaluating performance. Goal setting also enables feedback as others external to the team compare progress against pre-established targets. Finally, teams often understand best what they can and cannot achieve in a specified time. Team leaders must understand how to work with their team to establish objective goals.

Determine how to measure and reward participation and performance

A hurdle that still confronts too many organizations is a failure to recognize and reward the effort that team members put forth toward their assignments. Outdated reward structures that focus strictly on functional activities are still a common reason that teams fail in organizations (Sarin and Mahajan, 2001). Even today members often face uncertainty and frustration concerning how their organization evaluates and rewards individual and team performance (Barczak and Wilemon, 2001). Unfortunately, many organizations still do not grasp the importance of this issue.

Many recognition and reward systems encourage members not to participate on teams. Positive work ceases when organizations fail to reinforce, recognize, or reward work, particularly work that is in addition to regular responsibilities. Members who receive inadequate recognition will likely direct their efforts toward those areas that are recognized and rewarded. Participation may simply present too great a personal risk and create conflict once members realize that supporting a team takes time away from activities that are recognized and rewarded.

Developing the approaches and systems that support assessment should increase the likelihood that a team meets or exceeds expectations (Pritchard *et al.*, 1988). At a minimum, these systems should track overall team performance, often using the team's

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pre-established goals as a benchmark. Ideally, an assessment system will also gather objective information on individual contribution. This helps prevent the "free rider" or "social loafer" phenomena by ensuring that each member is accountable for his or her actions (Latane *et al.*, 1979; Latane, 1986).

Individual and team assessment can occur in a variety and combination of ways. Regular reporting sessions to management, project management tools that compare progress against pre-established milestones, peer assessment to evaluate individual contribution, and formal measurement against established goals all qualify as valid assessment techniques.

Closely aligned with measurement is reward and recognition. A system that recognizes and reinforces collective team performance can complement and amplify the motivational incentives built into a team's task (Hackman and Oldham, 1980). An important point here is the collective rather than individualistic nature of rewards. Teams usually perform better when management rewards the entire team rather than providing differential rewards to each member (McGrath, 1964). In fact, the destructive effects of rewarding individual contributions rather than team performance can be considerable (Lawler, 1981). Providing rewards and recognition only to individual employees increases tension between members as teams mature. Although members surmount work challenges as a collective unit, internal competition for individual rewards often affects morale and performance (Abramis, 1990).

Research findings are clear that group-based incentive systems positively affect effectiveness and productivity (Bullock and Lawler, 1984). Creating a linkage in each member's mind between team effort, performance, and rewards, particularly when participation is in addition to regular job responsibilities, must be a planning priority.

Develop team charters

Executive sponsors should create and communicate a formal charter that conveys a team's responsibilities, stipulates appropriate authority levels, and identifies as-needed members who will support core team members. The charter can also define a team's reporting relationship to management or clients, specify broad performance objectives, and address any other topic relevant to the team. Charters legitimize teams, particularly when the team must make decisions that affect others outside the team.

Conclusion

Successful teaming requires a careful examination of the planning issues related to the use of teams. If managers ignore these issues, more often than not they will wonder why the reality of using teams does not match the expectations surrounding their use. And in today's competitive environment, organizations must increasingly understand how to use work teams effectively if they expect teams to provide advantages that outweigh their costs.

J. Richard Hackman wrote that if we are to realize the vision of using teams, we must expand what we know about how to design, manage, and consult to work groups. He argued there is no well-tested and accepted body of research and theory to guide practitioners when using groups to do work, nor is there a documented set of techniques to help teams become more effective (Hackman, 1987). By considering the right issues and questions, organizations will better understand how to plan for and manage work groups. Once this occurs, perhaps we will begin to realize consistent benefits from this promising but often difficult way to perform work.

Note

1 To receive an electronic file that contains a process for guiding teams toward consensus, send an e-mail request to: rjt2@lehigh.edu

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