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EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT FOR TEAMS

Some organizations have been very successful in making the shift to a team environment. Others have not done so well. There is a compelling reason for organizations to help teams become effective, however. Based on our assessments of more than 2,500 work groups whose members had been working together for 6 months or more, only about half those groups were capable of contributing to their organization's goals; the other half were not. Of the 2,500 work groups, only 20% were high performance teams. Although organizational support is not the only thing that work groups need, it plays a key role.

This chapter outlines what research and theory teach us about the role of the organization in facilitating or inhibiting the development of high performance work teams. That role is quite large and very important, but it receives little organizational attention. The reason for this is simple: It is easier to create work groups and focus our efforts on group results than to address organizational issues that may be inhibiting group performance. If organizations want effective teams, however, all organization members, especially upper management, should consider using the following guidelines to create them.

PLANT TEAMS IN A FAVORABLE ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE

Teams function better in an organizational culture that encourages high performance by following these principles:

- Clearly define the organization's mission.
- Build teams on a need for collaboration.
- Support innovation.
- Expect success.
- Value superior quality and service.
- Pay attention to detail.
- Value team recommendations.
- Set clear expectations for team output, quality, timing, and pacing.
- Reward teamwork rather than individual performance.

We discuss each of these principles in more detail in this section.

Clearly Define the Organization's Mission

Groups flourish when their members are clear about what business they are in. This may seem obvious, but it is not always so. Once one of us asked a group what the mission of its organization was, and the members did not know, despite the fact that the organization's mission statement was clearly displayed on the wall of the group's meeting room. In another case, a group was asked what its organization's mission was, and the members sang the mission statement. Their singing was not sweet or lyrical; it was a singsong that expressed derision and disrespect. Organization members need not only to know the words contained in the mission statement but also to understand and believe those words.

Build Teams on a Need for Collaboration

Teams consist of interdependent members with shared goals. Form a team only if there is a goal that requires collaboration among members with unique competencies. Make it clear to the team what that goal is. Don't assemble people with individual goals and call them a team. Such pseudo teams come at a price for the members and for the organization.

Support Innovation

Some organizations tend to do things the way they've always been done. In organizations where this is the case, or organization members believe it is the case, teams will have more difficulty being successful. When you put people together as a group, combining their intelligence and creativity, it often leads members to come up with new and unexpected ideas and solutions. If the group is functioning in an organization that encourages new ideas and new ways of doing things, group members feel energized and supported. If not, members quickly become dispirited and begin to believe that there is no point to making suggestions that challenge the status quo.

Expect Success

Some organizations don't expect to be successful. This may sound absurd, but there are many examples of this attitude expressed in different ways by organization members. Here are just a few:

"What do you expect? This is a government agency."

"The CEO is leaving soon and doesn't really care about what we do."

"We're going to be merged anyway."

"People would rather be safe than successful."

If attitudes such as these exist in an organizational culture, team members will not give their best effort because they believe that giving 100% is not encouraged or valued.

Value Superior Quality and Service

In the real world, there is always some tension among quality, service, and profit. However, if organization members perceive that profit is more important than quality and service, they will become dispirited and cynical. Some examples of how this is expressed are as follows:

“People care more about their stock options than doing a good job.”

“They want us to pretend to be working to keep the inspectors off our backs.”

“They talk about customer service, but they don’t really mean it.”

Pay Attention to Detail

“Get a group together and work out this policy issue” is an example of a directive from upper management that has no detail and leaves the group leader with little to go on. The alternative would be for management to give the group leader a clear definition of the group’s task, all backup materials, and awareness and planning about group membership, timelines, meeting times, workloads, availability of potential members, and the like.

Value Team Recommendations

If team members believe that whatever they come up with will be rejected or changed by upper management, the chances of team success are diminished. If team leaders are told in advance what the team should come up with, success is even more unlikely. Again, this is self-evident, but unfortunately examples of such situations are all too common. In an environment where team recommendations are not valued, it is clear to all that teams are used to make the organization seem to be seeking team input when, in fact, it is not.

Set Clear Expectations for Team Output, Quality, Timing, and Pacing

If the group is given realistic guidelines and goals for what members are expected to produce and by when, the chances of success are much higher. For example, it is unrealistic to give a team 2 months to complete a complex task, especially if the members of that team have not worked together as a team in the past. It is also unrealistic to give a team a long-term project without some way of measuring progress along the way.

Reward Teamwork Rather Than Individual Performance

How to reward teamwork rather than individual performance is one of the most difficult issues organizations face regarding setting up teams. Most compensation systems are designed to evaluate and reward individual contributions, not team contributions. If individuals are to be motivated to create a high performance team, however, then the team’s performance should be a determinant of compensation and bonuses.

When the first four editions of *Creating Effective Teams* were published, few team compensation systems were available. That is no longer the case. Despite the availability of those models, however, many organizations still have not made the shift to team compensation.

Some organizations use recognition of team performance as a substitute for financial reward. Although this is helpful in some cases, this type of recognition has to be thought out carefully. Sometimes recognition of one team may create competition between teams. This can inhibit performance, because most teams rely on cooperation from other teams to accomplish their goals. In other cases, the kind of recognition can be a source of embarrassment to some team members.

Successful team compensation strategies are now readily available. Compensating employees for meeting their individual goals and for membership on a team that met its goals and objectives is the right combination. Organizations that do not have this combination will not get maximum results from their teams.

GIVE TEAMS WHAT THEY NEED TO DO THEIR BEST

Work groups function better in organizations that establish

- meaningful team goals and tasks that require skill, have variety, and make members interdependent;
- meaningful team goals and tasks that require continuous learning;
- access to the human resources necessary to accomplish team goals;
- access to the technical resources necessary to accomplish tasks;
- defined team work areas; and
- time to regularly reflect, learn, and self-correct.

Establish Meaningful Team Goals and Tasks That Require Skill, Have Variety, and Make Members Interdependent

Team members function better when they feel that team goals and tasks are meaningful, are interesting, and challenge them to think and work to capacity.

Team goals and tasks also should require collaboration among interdependent members. That is, a team should be necessary to accomplish them. Again, this seems self-evident, but a few examples will make it obvious that many groups have goals and tasks that do not require members to work together. These groups are treated as teams but, in fact, are not teams but pseudo teams. Examples include the following:

- Phone solicitors who work independently but are called a team and meet once a week to discuss team performance

- Salespeople who work independently, are paid for individual sales, and meet once a month to discuss team performance
- The top 50 administrators in an organization, who meet monthly to hear a report from the CEO
- People who report to the same boss but don't interact with each other at any other time

Establish Meaningful Team Goals and Tasks That Require Continuous Learning

Teams with goals and tasks that require continuous learning are the most successful teams. In fact, the best thing about a team with such goals and tasks is that its members will learn from each other and will seek out information to learn more about how to proceed. If a team's goals and tasks don't require new learning, a team format is probably not necessary for their accomplishment. Remember, teams develop as a response to external demands. If demands are challenging, then teams will be motivated to learn and adapt to meet those challenges, and therefore improve its team-work processes and mature.

Establish Access to the Human Resources Necessary to Accomplish Team Goals

A team that is expected to produce a new product on time and under a realistic budget but with no authority over or access to the people who set production schedules will not be successful. A team that is expected to determine best practices in a certain area but has no budget to visit other organizations or to consult experts in the area will probably be unsuccessful. A team that is mired in conflict and cannot ask for assistance from an internal or external consultant to help them work out their differences also will have great difficulty being successful. Make sure that team members have the help they need.

Establish Access to the Technical Resources Necessary to Accomplish Tasks

You can't build a house without tools. Yet some teams we've worked with were expected to accomplish tasks without even minimal access to computer equipment, relevant software, and other resources necessary for goal achievement.

Establish Defined Team Work Areas and Functional Communication Tools

For groups in the same location, a defined work area is very useful. Proximity makes communication easier, and the work progresses faster. After all, we are still human. We don't need to know other members intimately, but we do need to know people's

thoughts and attitudes about the work we are doing together. Nowadays people work at home some of or all the time. Groups with members who work mostly from home need clear agreements about what they can expect from each other regarding presence at the physical workplace. Can members work from home all the time, or does the work require members to come to a physical work area some of the time. Members also need to make agreements about how to communicate and work together when they are not working face-to-face.

We have become used to conference calls, videoconferencing, group discussions via e-mail, and chat rooms. Research in this area suggests that these forms of group interaction can work well. Today many, if not most, teams communicate and work digitally some of or all the time. Research on digital teams is growing, and there is still much to find out about the impact of distance and technology on group processes, team effectiveness, and the experience of being a team member.

Give Teams Time to Reflect, Learn, and Adapt

Teams who regularly stop to reflect on their teamwork processes and how they can be improved are more effective than teams who don't. If the workload is too high and there is no time for the team to reflect together, it is likely that ineffective or even dysfunctional work processes will go unnoticed. Teams can discover and correct ineffective practices and work processes during work. Other dysfunctional practices and processes take time to identify, understand and solve, and should be explored and discussed after a work period and before the next. Teams need time to look back, learn, and plan ahead.

PICK MEMBERS BASED ON THEIR ABILITY TO DO THE TASK AND THEIR ABILITY TO CONTRIBUTE TO TEAM SUCCESS

What is known about effective members is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5. This chapter is about how organizations can support their groups. Selecting and recruiting new employees to an organization and then composing teams is a way organizations exert considerable influence on teams. According to recent research there is correlation between personality and team effectiveness. These findings are useful for selection and recruitment and when teams are being composed. Research shows us that it is beneficial for a team's performance to have members who have an innate desire to make an effort and work diligently toward high goals (conscientiousness) and who are naturally considerate and helpful to other team members (agreeableness). Agreeableness, unlike conscientiousness, has no impact on individual task performance. It becomes important when people work together on a task that makes them interdependent. Members' ability to maintain a sufficiently supportive and flexible approach to other members across time and situations has an impact on collaboration and hence on productivity.

There is also emergent awareness of the impact of the personality trait *openness to experience* on teamwork and performance in functionally diverse teams. This personality factor reflects a person's curiosity and willingness to experience a diversity of feelings, think new thoughts, and explore different values. It seems that teams with a high average level of openness to experience among its members are better at integrating members' different functional knowledge, than teams with lower average levels of openness to experience. This knowledge integration means that the team has a greater shared knowledge pool to use for problem-solving and task work and that they perform better. Also, deeply held values like a preference for teamwork and a collectivist approach to work are beneficial for team performance. Members who value collaboration are more likely to choose collective ways of working before individual task work. This will likely strengthen and develop teamwork processes.

There is, however, little support to date for the commonly held notion that teams benefit from being composed of members with *complementary* personality traits. A team with, for example, a mix of members where some are highly agreeable and others are less agreeable, doesn't perform better than a team with only highly agreeable members. This popular idea that intuitively appeared realistic has proved not to be true, so organizations should not waste any resources on making team composition any more complicated than it is. The only exception we know of, to this conclusion that a diverse personality mix does not enhance team effectiveness, is that it seems that a mix of extroverted and introverted members may be beneficial. This is due to the fact that extroverted members are more likely to take up leadership and introverted members are more likely to follow. A team needs both leadership and followership, and teams with members who share responsibility and leadership with the formal leader is more effective, presuming that there are also members who are willing to follow.

Complementary task-related competencies, on the other hand, are positively correlated with team performance, while age and gender differences seem not to be. It is a good idea to compose a team with members who have different knowledge and skills. Organizations will do well to make thorough analyses of which competencies are needed for a team task and compose the team of members with complementary skills that meet the needs. It seems that an ideally composed team consists of members who have some knowledge and expertise in common and some knowledge and expertise that is unique. The information that members have in common help them understand the knowledge that members hold uniquely. It helps the team to continually integrate new knowledge.

It is useful to know which personality traits and values predict teamwork performance when you are in the process of hiring members and composing the team. Once the team is composed and all the members are in place, this information is less helpful. Once the selection is done, the team will have to do its work with the members at hand and solve the problems that emerge together. Focusing on personality differences at this stage is counterproductive and could lead to negative consequences for the team

and its members. Focusing on the team's goals and how members' different task-related competencies can contribute to those is productive. Every member must work to take up their role in the team with their unique combination of personal resources and shortcomings as best they can and with the support of each other.

EDUCATE PEOPLE FOR TEAM PARTICIPATION COMPETENCE

Organizations that focus on educating and training people about the technical aspects of their jobs and about effective group participation will increase the likelihood that organizational teams will become high performance teams.

Most organizations do a reasonable job of choosing people with technical expertise and providing ongoing technical training to their employees. When it comes to facilitating the group participation of members or leaders, however, organizations don't do so well. Most employees in large organizations have attended the obligatory half-day workshop on group dynamics, and many have attended leadership training or team development workshops. However, the quality and duration of these experiences vary widely.

Imagine providing computer training that was inaccurate or incomplete. Imagine giving technicians inexact information about turbine maintenance. Although this probably happens occasionally, organizations tend to be careful and conservative about technical training. Unfortunately, this is not the case with group or leadership training.

Organizations forget to ask training providers some very basic and important questions. These questions include the following:

- What is taught in this training?
- Is the content of the training based on solid research evidence?
- Can the trainer provide us with social science references that support the training content?
- Does the training work? Do people who attend this training actually perform better as team members or leaders?

All training providers should be able to answer the first three pretty well. Trainers should be aware of the body of literature that supports the content of the training they provide. Trainers should also be aware of literature that disagrees with their approach. If a trainer is unable to answer the first three questions, head for the hills.

Regarding the fourth question, we now know more about which types of training do have effects on members' and leaders' behaviors. We know, for example, that trainings that combine instruction, practice, and reflection have positive effects on participants' satisfaction, learning, and behavior, and also on organizational performance.

Trainings that only includes instruction do not. Also, trainings that only take place at one place in time is less effective compared to repeated trainings.

AVOID UNSUBSTANTIATED TEAM DEVELOPMENT AND CONSULTATION STRATEGIES

Because not all work groups manage to reach high levels of effectiveness and productivity on their own, efforts to develop intervention strategies that will assist groups in meeting goals and maximizing effectiveness have been underway for many years.

In recent years a number of meta-analyses have shown that several intervention methods do have an impact on teams' functioning and productivity.

Klein and colleagues studied the impact of four specific team-building interventions (goal setting, interpersonal relations, problem-solving, and role clarification) on teamwork and found that all four types of intervention have a positive effect. Of the four types of intervention studied, it turned out that goal setting and role clarification had the strongest impact on team processes.

Keiser and Arthur performed a meta-analysis of so-called After Action Reviews (AAR). AAR are sessions in which teams look back at a recent work episode and discuss how they worked together. The goal of an AAR is to reflect, learn, and develop plans for improved teamwork, based on these learnings. The researchers found that teams who go through regular AAR are more effective than teams who don't. According to this research, teams who regularly do AAR perform on average 30% better compared with teams who don't.

Another example of research into the effects of team development is a meta-analysis by McEwan and colleagues. The goal of their study was to establish whether team development interventions have an impact and to clarify how interventions should be designed to have that impact. Their results show that team-building interventions do have an effect on team performance. They also show that interventions should be experience-based, which means they should engage members in active work from which they can learn something about the team's processes and how they can influence them in a positive direction. They also found that interventions should be designed in a way that allows members to improve team processes before work (analysis, goal setting, planning), during work (coordination, communication, support), and after work (feedback, reflection, evaluation).

Before choosing an intervention to improve team performance, organization members should ask the consultant the following questions:

- What are the underlying assumptions of the intervention? That is, how will the intervention change the dynamics of the group?
- Is the intervention based on solid research evidence?

- Can the consultant provide social science references that support the intervention content?
- Does the intervention work? Do teams who participate in this type of intervention increase their effectiveness and productivity?

If the consultant cannot answer the first three questions or bases their response solely on personal experience, head for the hills. For the fourth question, there is a lot of information today about what works and what doesn't in the realm of team development interventions. We know, for example, that team development and team training should be experience-based (i.e., based on practical and active ways of learning as opposed to lectures or presentations to a passive audience of team members). Make sure you find out if the consultant is aware of these new developments.

AVOID HELPING TEAMS TOO MUCH

Many groups get too much help. They often have an array of helpers such as sponsors, coaches, leaders, trainers, and consultants. However, this help is not always *helpful*. Throughout this chapter, we have outlined the things groups really need to function and to get moving again when they get stuck. We have found no evidence in the literature that increasing the number of expert helpers who meet with the team on a regular basis has any positive effects.

When groups ask for help, they should get that help if it conforms to the guidelines outlined here. Too much help often increases group dependence on experts and reduces the chances that group members will learn to be effective and productive on their own.

We mentioned this earlier, but we reiterate it here because it is so important: Teams need accurate and frequent feedback from their external stakeholders, about their performance so they can learn to help themselves. Without feedback, it is very difficult for teams to judge their progress or make corrections to get back on course.

MAKE SURE EACH TEAM HAS ENOUGH AUTONOMY TO DO ITS WORK BUT REMAINS CONNECTED WITH THE REST OF THE ORGANIZATION

The mission of every team should be clear to other teams and individuals in the organization. If organization members and units are expected to help each other, they must know what others are doing.

Teams also need sufficient autonomy to do their work. They need to be clear about what decisions they can make on their own and what decisions must be reviewed by others. At the same time, teams must stay in close contact with other organizational members and groups. If an isolated group makes a decision without involving others, the odds of having that decision countermanded or ignored increase significantly.

Teams must stay in close contact with others in the organization, because good working relationships with other organization members and teams are important indicators of an effective team.

CONDUCT ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT REVIEWS REGULARLY

Many of the guidelines outlined in this chapter could be read as things that only upper management can accomplish. It is not our intention to imply that. Every member of the organization has a role to play in the success of the groups with whom they interact. Each group has a responsibility to solicit the things necessary for its success as well.

Before and during the life of any group, it would be helpful to review these guidelines. Team members or potential members, along with others who interact with the team in some meaningful way, should conduct these reviews to determine the group's level of organizational support and to make changes as needed. Periodic review sessions focused on organizational support, not team performance, will have at least two effects. First, problems with the level of organizational support can be identified and corrected early. Second, members will be encouraged by the efforts of others to ensure that the team becomes a high performance team.

Organizational support review sessions have not been researched. However, because research has outlined a number of organizational factors that increase the chances of team success, it is only logical that organization members should use such review sessions to ensure that these factors are being addressed.

The following checklist is provided to help people participating in an organizational support review session evaluate the level of organizational support for a particular group. Group members should complete the checklist anonymously before the meeting. Ensuring individual anonymity is crucial to the success of this process. Individuals must feel free to be candid in their responses.

A summary should be prepared before the meeting. At the meeting, participants should discuss the summary and identify areas where organizational support is adequate or superior and areas that need improvement. Action steps should be outlined as well. Although there will be areas where, for legitimate reasons, support cannot be provided at ideal levels, both the group and the organization of which it is a part should aim to do the best they can.

THE ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT CHECKLIST

Please read the statements below. Circle the number that most accurately describes your response to the statement. Use the following key to respond to each statement.

1. disagree strongly 2. disagree to some extent 3. agree to some extent 4. agree strongly			
Section I			
1. This organization supports innovation.			
1	2	3	4
2. This organization expects to be successful.			
1	2	3	4
3. This organization values superior quality in all work endeavors.			
1	2	3	4
4. Organization members pay attention to detail.			
1	2	3	4
5. This organization values team recommendations.			
1	2	3	4
<i>Section I score: _____</i>			
Section II			
6. This organization has a clearly defined organizational mission.			
1	2	3	4
7. This organization has clear expectations about the quality of our group's output.			
1	2	3	4
8. This organization has clear expectations for our group's timing and deadlines.			
1	2	3	4
9. Our group's goals are clear to the rest of the organization.			
1	2	3	4
<i>Section II score: _____</i>			
Section III			
10. The goals and tasks of our group are meaningful.			
1	2	3	4
11. Our group's tasks are interesting to group members.			
1	2	3	4

12. Our group's tasks require group members to work collaboratively.			
1	2	3	4
13. Our group's tasks require continuous learning.			
1	2	3	4
14. Our group has been provided with members with appropriate technical skills.			
1	2	3	4
<i>Section III score: _____</i>			
Section IV			
15. Our group has access to the technical resources necessary to accomplish its tasks.			
1	2	3	4
16. Our group has access to the human resources necessary to accomplish its tasks.			
1	2	3	4
17. Our group has a defined work area.			
1	2	3	4
18. Our group has sufficient autonomy to do its work.			
1	2	3	4
19. Our group is in close communication with appropriate organizational members and groups.			
1	2	3	4
<i>Section IV score: _____</i>			
Section V			
20. Our group receives regular feedback about its performance and progress.			
1	2	3	4
21. Our group receives positive recognition for group achievements.			
1	2	3	4
22. Rewards and recognition are based on group achievements.			
1	2	3	4
<i>Section V score: _____</i>			

(Continued)

(Continued)

Section VI			
23. Our group has been provided with members with skills in the area of group participation.			
1	2	3	4
24. Our group has been provided with a leader with skills in the area of group management and participation.			
1	2	3	4
25. Our group has been provided with all technical training necessary for group success.			
1	2	3	4
26. Our group has been provided with appropriate team training.			
1	2	3	4
27. Our group leader has been provided with appropriate leadership training.			
1	2	3	4
28. Our group has been provided with the help of consultants when it has been deemed necessary for group success.			
1	2	3	4
Section VI score: _____			
Section VII			
If group training has been provided to your group, please answer the following questions:			
29. I learned what I needed to know to work successfully with this group.			
1	2	3	4
30. I felt that the trainer was competent.			
1	2	3	4
If group consultation has been provided to your group, please answer the following questions:			
31. The consultation helped the group members work more effectively together.			
1	2	3	4
32. I felt that the consultant was competent.			
1	2	3	4
Section VII score: _____			

Maximum score: 128

Minimum score: 32

My score: _____

What is the overall level of organizational support?

Total Score	Organization's Grade
115+	A
103–114	B
89–102	C

What are the section scores?

Section I: Organizational Culture

Total Score	Organization's Grade
18+	A
16–17	B
14–15	C

Section II: Mission Clarity

Total Score	Organization's Grade
14+	A
12–13	B
10–11	C

Section III: Task and Technology

Total Score	Organization's Grade
18+	A
16–17	B
14–15	C

Section IV: Autonomy and Access

Total Score	Organization's Grade
14+	A
12–13	B
10–11	C

Section V: Feedback and Recognition

Total Score	Organization's Grade
11+	A
9-10	B
7-8	C

Section VI: Training and Development

Total Score	Organization's Grade
22+	A
19-21	B
16-18	C

Section VII: Training Quality

Total Score	Organization's Grade
14+	A
12-13	B
10-11	C

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