

Fact-File 11: Designing teams that... work for superior performance



Extracts from **The Learning-Centred Leadership Series: Module 5**

The Move to Teams

Teams are everywhere in business now - from local councils, to courier services. Recent Australian surveys say 1 in 3 businesses have some form of team-based work – slightly higher than in the US or UK. Jon Katzenbach (1993 p.19) predicts teams will remain the way of the future:

‘...most models of the “organisation of the future” that we have heard about -- “networked”, “clustered”, “non-hierarchical”, “horizontal” and so forth -- are premised on teams surpassing individuals as the primary performance unit in the company.’

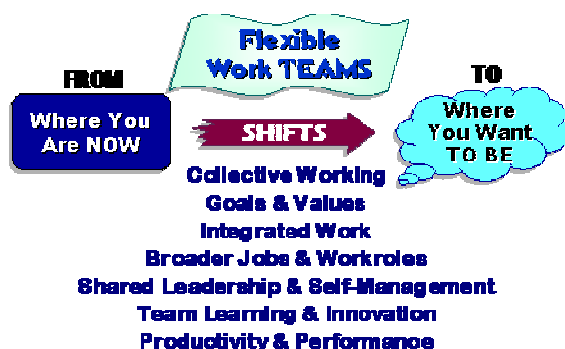
Why the switch from traditional top-down, 'boss-worker' models to a participative one based on more flexible and self-managed workteams?

Because organisations are just too complex now for any single individual to think they can run them on their own anymore (if they ever did!).

Are you a Group or a Team?

You may say you already work in a team. But there are groups *and* there are teams. Before setting up workteams, it's critical to understand there's a big difference between:

- a *team* -- who have common goals, share responsibility for leading and co-ordinating, direct themselves and work collectively together on things much of the time; and...
- a *workgroup* -- which is a loose collection of individuals who work independently on their own separate activities, often competing or working at cross-purposes, who rarely work collectively together on anything.



Here are some key differences between groups and teams. Which one are you? *Teams have:*

- A common performance need or challenge
- Joint commitment to shared goals/visions

- Agreed ways to make decisions together
- Defined degrees of self-management
- Shared responsibility and work collectively
- Redesigned their jobs and integrated their workroles to support more flexible working
- A say in how work is planned and done
- Broader skills to handle more of the work
- Agreed operating principles for handling more collective work arrangements

It takes a radical re-think of these and other fundamental concepts to make teams *really work*.

Making Teams Work

Most workplaces say they work in teams -- but very few know how to make teams work. One of the greatest hurdles we face is that few of us have ever really learned how to work in a team, far less design or form one.

As many organisations find out the hard way, you can't just switch to teams overnight. Many teams succeed. But many more attempts fail. Why?

While most managers say they get work done with and through teams, many times they don't think about what kind of teams they really need.

A very powerful first step you can take is talk with staff about what kind of workgroups you currently have and what kind of teams might best suit the future needs of your business, the people in it and the work that's being done.

Designing or Building Teams?

Many people see team design and team-building as the same thing. Indeed, both do focus in different ways on the same outcome: *'How can we improve the effective functioning of this team?'*

Team-building deals with dynamics -- the pattern of interactions, behaviour, communication and relationships in teams which affect how they work together. Think of it as a *maintenance* function.

But before you build a team, you need to form it.

Often, problems teams encounter stem from deeper causes like the way the team was put together in the first place, how workroles and jobs are designed and the kind of operating principles teams follow.

Fact-File 11: Designing teams that... work for superior performance



Extracts from **The Learning-Centred Leadership Series: Module 5**

These are what we see as team *design* issues. And they need a more fundamental rethink than mere team-building can give.

- ❑ People first have to learn how to design – or *re-form* – an effective workteam before they attend to the interpersonal, development issues of building it.
- ❑ Team building often doesn't deal with many of these real, central issues like expanding team work boundaries, redesign of work processes and self-direction.

Overlooking these critical issues often means your team is flawed before it starts. Problems keep cropping up because they're inherent in the way the team was designed in the first place.

Steps in Forming Teams

Teams don't just happen. They need a *plan of steps* to follow and a *set of tools* to construct them. Without this, teams may work through some important issues but are unlikely to address all of the key ones.

No matter what kind of team you set up, there are some common questions all teams need to work through. Addressing these will take you through a series of steps to help you develop your own unique teamworking solutions.

1. What are the team's visions and goals?

Work with them to identify clear performance challenges and shape a shared vision.

2. What changes can we make to the way we work now?

Teams often forget to redesign but it's critical since it determines how much scope you have to expand job boundaries and improve work processes, roles and procedures. Work with your team to generate new team design ideas and change options.

3. How will we work together and what new operating principles do we need?

If teams forget to change old work practices, people stay inside their traditional job boxes. Work with your team to expand old jobs, develop new workroles and work out new methods and procedures. These become your new operating principles!

4. How can things be better managed and co-ordinated? How will leadership be handled?

This is a vital issue in team operation. Work with your team to identify the best way to handle leadership/co-ordination, agree decision-making protocols and share leadership or co-ordination roles amongst the team.

5. How do we measure/manage performance?

Identifying new performance improvement goals/measures and writing these up in a team charter is essential for high-performing teams. It's a vital benchmark to validate whether you've met challenges and made a difference.

6. How do we learn together? What new work skills and team skills do people need?

Learning to work in teams needs both kinds of skills. Work with your team to analysing what skills you already have in the team, what new skills you need and develop team learning strategies for cross-skilling and sharing skills.

7. What team formation steps do we need to plan to get there?

Think of the checklist you've just worked through as a kind of *roadmap* for team formation. Work with your team early in the process to identify a plan of steps to introduce and set up teams.

Team-based work is now part of every business leader's landscape. As well as providing environments that encourage people to make suggestions, think creatively and innovate, workteams are a vehicle for tapping a broader range of knowledge, expertise, innovation and initiative that can widen your viewpoint about what can be done differently and better in your business.

The Change Forum conducts 2-day learning forums on *Leading through Teams...* Contact:

☎: 07-4068 7591

✉: LCLeadership@thechangeforum.com

🌐: www.thechangeforum.com

This Fact-file is taken from the Guide to Module 5 in our Learning-Centred Leadership Series *Leading through Teams*

© Copyright Bill Cropper, The Change Forum 2004-7.

You are permitted to copy it in small quantities within your own work unit for learning exchange, provided this acknowledgement appears on all copies and any materials derived from it.

