WHEN TEAMS WORK – AND WHEN THEY DON'T!

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Ideas that will help teams work effectively

1. Do you have a 'real team'? UGM finds that dysfunctional 'teams' often have very poor boundaries. It's not clear who is in and who is out. Look out for those slightly larger teams where members are frequently away and have others deputise in their place. That structure is really a committee – which is NOT a team.

2. Be clear on task. Even if your organisation is organised into teams, it doesn't mean everything can be done as a team. Often, you'll get greater traction by allocating the job to one or two people. At the very least, get them to develop a draft proposition which others can then modify. Starting with a truly blank canvass too often can lose more than it gains.

3. When you do work together as a team, make sure that overall intent is crystal clear. Then explain how people might contribute. If you don't have a suitably diverse range of perspectives, you risk either ordinary outcomes or even critical error as a result of 'groupthink'. Finally, recognise and value contributions, and try and develop outcomes that encapsulate different people's ideas.

Well-intentioned, but flawed!

Someone looking at Jess and her team now would rightly conclude that all was not well. Actually, it was going very badly! A few of the members had disengaged, sitting away from the long boardroom table. Two more were in heated discussion, levels of anger rising rapidly. They'd been at it for a couple of minutes now. Verbal heavyweight boxers in what seemed to be a fight for their lives! Jess was trying, with little effect, to steer the exchanges in a more productive direction. Eventually, there seemed to be no other option but to bring the meeting to a halt. She rang the final bell. No winners, all losers.

The interchange of ideas had started an hour before with much gusto and enthusiasm from all team members. Slowly though, conversation had become bogged down and started dragging. Individuals began opting out, particularly when the tone turned aggressive. Aggression turned to open hostility. This was so contrary to the principles of trust, consultation and shared destiny that Jess had tried to foster. How had it gone so wrong for Jess and her team?

What is a team?

Before we go any further, let's take a quick look at what makes a team. Real teams, according to Harvard University team specialist, Prof. J Robert Hackman, have three distinctive features.

Real teams have clear boundaries distinguishing members from non-members. Secondly, team members operate interdependently, relying on one another to produce outputs for which there is shared responsibility. Finally, members work together for some time, with a semblance of stable membership.

A critical first principle for effective teams is that the team is a 'real team'. If you're not working with a real team then you'll need to focus on a different set of conditions that create effectiveness suitable to the context.

For example, a happenstance grouping of people at a public meeting would respond and 'work' very differently than a real team. So would a Standing Committee that met to adjudicate disputes. And two or three individuals sharing ideas that they were independently pursuing would be different yet again.

What makes for effective teams?

Additional team research shows that a number of other conditions also need to be in place for teams to be effective. First, members need a compelling direction. This is a key reason why UGM so vigorously encourages clients to establish a clear Purpose (and also Promise, Principles, Priorities and Plans) for teams at all levels.

Next, team structure needs to fit well with task design. A key factor, according to Hackman and colleagues, is that the team tackles a 'whole and meaningful' scope of work. The team is as small as possible, and members collectively bring a diverse and complementary set of task and interpersonal skills. They are sufficiently varied to avoid duplication or redundant capacity, but suitably similar to provide a common platform for communicating and coordinating. Effective teams also establish and clarify the core norms of conduct.

A third key factor is the environment in which the team operates. The organisation needs to reward team work. It needs to skill people to work in teams (both technical and 'teaming' capabilities). And, highlighting our knowledge economy context, organisational information systems need to support teams with the data they need to do their work.

Finally, Hackman suggests that teams ought to have expert coaching. Taken as a given for most sports teams, but somewhat of a rare species outside of that context. Yet, expert coaches could help minimise motivation and team coordination problems. They are also able to support members in building commitment to the team and its task.

Coaches can assist teams overcome obstructive but habitual routines and inappropriate or unhelpful weighting of individuals' ideas. Instead, teams could work towards developing innovative work methods and sharpen their focus on the task. All members in the team are able to make a valuable contribution and share.

Ultimately, the sum of the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. And this final outcome, synergy, is why teams are so alluring. A certain constellation of people can produce more than if each worked on their own (or in other configurations). But, this not always the case!

When don't teams work?

On reflection, Jess recognised that, although well intentioned, she had set the team up for failure. They had spent most of the hour trying to develop a team response to a negative client email. In reality, it wasn't particularly critical. Any member could easily have dealt with it alone and the others would have been satisfied. Team members ended up arguing about the use and placing of individual words in the reply – but it wasn't really about wording and order.

The hollowness of the task had simply served as a release mechanism for pent-up anger. Frustration had been building each time Jess had the team working on trivial tasks that would have been better served by individual effort. Poorly chosen team tasks had destroyed teamwork. It's a trap which snares many leaders and teams. Does it apply to you too?