



Management Assistance Program

BUILDING AND MAINTAINING STRONG TEAMS

GOALS:

To help organizations, managers, and employees:

- understand team dynamics
- build strong and effective teams
- incorporate teams into the fundamental mission of the organization

OVERVIEW:

Unless you are a single proprietor and work completely alone, you probably have ongoing relationships with others in the workplace to fulfill your work design, manage, maintain, or develop some product or specified outcome(s). These groups are called teams. In fact, it could be argued that teams are a fundamental social structure in society. This is particularly true in organizations.

One working definition of a team is:

- A collection of individuals who have agreed to engage in a set or sets of behaviors designed to accomplish some common mission or missions.

In the workplace, teams come in many types:

- Departments
- Divisions
- Management Teams
- Leadership Teams
- Union Teams
- Project Teams
- Task Forces
- Work Units

Teams may be “permanent” in nature (e.g., Departments and Divisions) or they may be explicitly designed as “temporary” in duration (e.g., Project Teams and Task Forces). And teams operate in the workplace at different levels and with different perspectives:

- Within a Single Unit
- A Single Unit
- Work Function/Job Group
- Labor Force
- Management
- Human Resources
- Upper Management
- Middle Management
- The Organization as a Whole

Within the organization there will be many teams designed to accomplish some aspect of the overall mission of the business. For those teams to be optimally effective, they must maintain focus on the corporate mission, seeing the sub-mission to which they are assigned in the context of how it relates to the company overall. When this focus is lost, teams lose effectiveness and can eventually become dysfunctional to the detriment of the overall business.

OBJECTIVES:

1. Define the Benefits of Strong Teams

All organizations work in teams; from employees fulfilling similar functions to structured work groups designed for specific purposes. Some workforces are conscious that they are in teams while others are not. This distinction can be the difference between high productivity and lost opportunities for success. The best workplaces foster team cohesion and interweave teambuilding into everyday business practices. The benefits of this perspective are:

- Universal understanding of the organizational mission – business goals and objectives must be specified for teams to work towards them
- Group understanding of the unit/department mission – unit/department goals and objectives must be specified for teams to work towards them
- Understanding of how unit missions fit into the organization as a whole - unit goals are presented as sub-goals of the organization, keeping their focus in context
- Input from an optimum number of employees – work teams foster input from everyone
- Maximum buy-in from employees – teams empower employees to become part of the solution
- Greater problem solving capabilities – the whole is greater than the sum of its parts

- Enhanced creativity– teams become invested in improvement
- Optimum utilization of personnel – managers gain greater access to the strengths and weaknesses of team members and can manage accordingly
- Camaraderie and a sense of common purpose – teammates are “in this thing together”
- Building morale, trust, and respect – developing and maintaining strong and well-functioning teams enhances team and organizational morale, trust, and mutual respect among managers and employees

2. Describe the Components of Work Teams

Every work group has similar components:

MISSION:

There is a reason for the existence of the team; a purpose that is important to the organization as a whole. Depending on the nature of the team, the mission can be temporary - in order to get through a specific issue or time period – or it may remain in place as a foundational perspective from which to operate. Regardless of nature, the team must be clear on its mission – why does it exist? What is it here to do?

TEAM MEMBERS:

Teams are made up members or teammates. Each has a role or roles that relate to the mission. Each is accountable for some element that is important to the whole. Since no individual member has all of the elements, coordination between them is paramount.

TEAM LEADER:

Each team must have a leader and, preferably, only one designated leader to avoid confusion over ultimate responsibility and accountability for achieving the team mission. Someone must assume responsibility for insuring that the parts fit together to achieve the mission. The leader may or may not also be a team member (although in the most effective models he/she is), but their primary responsibility is supervising coordination between the parts to effect the desired outcome.

TEAM ABILITIES:

It is of utmost importance that the capability of the group matches the demands of the mission. If the goal is to win a Super Bowl, using High School players, even the very best High School players, would not be congruent with the mission because from the outset the team would

have insufficient experience and ability to get the job done. Organizations must be careful in the team selection process and look for “fit” as regards to mission as criteria. Team leaders must be honest about their group’s abilities and not take on more than they can accomplish.

RESOURCES:

Does the team have enough of the needed resources – whatever they may be – to accomplish the mission? If the answer is no, then the wise organization either supplies the resources, waits until such time as existing resources are sufficient, or modifies the mission to “fit” team wherewithal. The Team Leader may coordinate resource allocation or assign it to a team member, but in either case the “best laid plans” can fail to flourish without an intelligent plan for resource management.

SUPPORT:

Technically support is a resource, but it demands special attention. For a team to be successful on any ongoing basis, it must have support from the organization. If it is left to flounder, it will. If its mission has been accomplished, then disband the team or find it a new mission.

3. Use Strategies to Build Strong Teams

- Clear articulation and communication of team mission(s)
- Clear communication of roles and role changes
- Clear communication of team processes (how things are done)
- Consistency of team processes and their commitment to them
- Solicitation of input from team members (especially regarding changes)
- Commitment to honesty among team members (demonstrated)
- Clear expectations and processes regarding team problem resolutions (consistency and effectiveness in how inner-group problems are handled)
- Strong leadership (from Team Leader as well as group members)
- Commitment to the mission(s)
- Commitment to the team and its members

SUMMARY: Tips for Building and Maintaining Strong Teams

- Realize that all employees (unless they are self-employed) are working in teams even though some teams are more informal than others.
- Understand that teamwork requires cooperation, communication and collaboration between its members in order to function effectively.
- Teambuilding activities and support systems should be a regular part of the operations to assure the teams remain effective and strong in carrying out their objectives.
- Preferably, teams should have only one designated leader to avoid confusion over ultimate responsibility for achieving the team mission. Teams with “co-leaders” have a more difficult task in keeping lines of accountability clear.
- Strong teams have common missions and goals and often refer back to those missions and goals for clarity and direction.
- Dysfunctional teams may develop due to issues of extreme competition, distrust, lack of communication, lack of coordination between individual goals, or personal resentment.
- Each team member must be assigned a specific responsibility(ies) and each team member must want a specific responsibility(ies). Working as a participant within a team is a skill and requires constant practice and initiative. Team members who standby and watch others take the responsibility for success are not engaged and do not realize or activate their own personal responsibility.
- Managers who have disjointed teams (some engaged and others who are not) need to re-evaluate the team process and motivate all employees to participate at appropriate levels or reform the teams with different members.
- Some projects and tasks may require initial team effort while others are better started by individuals who later work with teams once the foundations of the projects are laid.
- When building a team, leaders should choose members wisely and consider their abilities, time, interest, experience and commitment to the team goals.
- Teams that are not supported by the organization or their leaders may become unnecessary due to atrophy and lack of integration within the total organizational mission. Teams should therefore constantly re-evaluate their purpose, goals, resources, and management support, and higher-level management must carry out a similar evaluation from its perspective.