

Collaboration and Teamwork

A People & Culture White Paper

Introduction

Being part of a high performing, high achieving team is a scintillating experience. There is nothing more engaging, more exhilarating and more satisfying than achieving success through teamwork. It is an experience that as human beings we are genetically programmed to continually seek to recreate. One of basic human psychological drivers is the desire to bond, to affiliate to join with others to achieve an important goal. In corporate life, as in sport, this driver finds true expression in teamwork and as engaging employee experiences go it is one of the best.

Commercially the case for teamwork is a powerful one. Research on group decision-making has consistently shown that a group of people working as a team can consistently generate more ideas and better solutions than the same people working independently. As individuals we learn faster and more effectively in a team environment than we do on our own. Culturally teams encourage working for the collective good rather than an individual's narrow interests. High performing teams increase flexibility, speed of response, productivity, improve quality, are more innovative and experience lower turnover and absenteeism than their functional equivalent. Teams can create synergistic outcomes: innovative and creative approaches that arise from bringing together a diverse combination of ideas and experiences. Where teams actively involve members in decision-making they lead to higher quality decisions and improved implementation. In an environment where there is a continuing demand to be faster, cheaper, better, the requirement for team based performance has never been greater.

However the changing nature of work is leading to a change in the type of teamwork required. Sequential, repetitive, structured work is giving way to work that is increasingly unstructured requiring knowledge, intellect and collective thinking power. This in turn is increasing the requirement for cross-functional working. Customer retention, customer loyalty, responsiveness, service quality and sensitivity to customer needs are organisational initiatives that require the management of complex reciprocal interdependencies and have no respect for functional boundaries.

Solutions that span products, markets and technological processes are increasingly the norm. In turn systems and processes are increasing in complexity, the proliferation of information and information technologies has made it impossible for individuals to perform their jobs alone or even in tight knit work teams. The balance of workload is now more cross-functional than functional. To survive and compete businesses have to develop and bring products and services to market more quickly than ever before. This requires responsiveness, efficiency, quality and flexibility. From our research it is clear that teams that effectively manage integration and interdependency across research, production, service, marketing, sales and other functions do this best.

In such an environment roles are more fluid. Individuals are members of multiple teams often participating in meetings involving several different teams in the course of a day. Teams are also fluid they are formed to discharge a particular purpose do their job and dissolve. This world does not have time for the traditional forming, storming, norming approach to teamwork. Individuals need to be able to combine with their colleagues, synthesise their

collective thoughts and experiences immediately and deal rapidly with the task in hand. It requires an organisational climate within which the team-skills that enable the constructive and effective deployment of functional or technical knowledge are as important if not more important than the knowledge itself.

It requires that cross-functional collaborative team-working is a core competence where synergy is achieved through teams working closely and reciprocally together in an integrated network where the combined effect is greater than the sum of the separate teams. Such organisations are in effect a **team of teams**.

Strategic Context

The increasing complexity of organisations is reflected in the burgeoning number of different of teams operating in today's businesses. Work teams, cross-functional teams, problem solving teams, performance improvement teams, process teams, integrating teams, management teams, project teams, guidance teams, self-managed teams, semi autonomous teams, quality teams, audit teams, task forces etc. etc. etc.

In effect however there are only three distinct types of team:

Work teams: These are teams that design manufacture or deliver a product to an external or an internal customer. Often referred to as the home team in many organisations this is typically where an individual resides for pay, rations and pastoral care. Membership of such teams tends to be relatively stable and the role of the team as well as the contribution expected of its members are clearly defined as operating procedures.

Improvement teams: These teams are *parallel* teams in that they operate alongside the formal organisational structure and draw their membership on a part-time basis from work teams. They are charged with making recommendations for changes within the organisation to its processes or systems to improve quality, cost performance or timeliness of delivery and are the descendants of the quality teams of the 80s. Unlike work teams improvement teams tend to be viewed as temporary although in reality they are used for ongoing problem solving and innovation. Project teams on the other hand have full time members and are time limited. They are created to work on specific problems or projects and then disband.

Integrating teams: These are a rapidly increasing feature of organisational life and are a concept organisations find difficult to make work. Their role is to ensure that work is co-ordinated across work teams and improvement teams. Typically they work around a shared focus such as a process, a particular customer, product line, technology, service or geographic territory. Management teams are a special form of integrating team that sets overall direction, establishes goals and monitors the performance of work and improvement teams and typically comprises of the team leaders of the individual teams.

The Problem

The overwhelming benefits of team working and its contribution to commercial success is well understood so why is it that few organisations have successfully harnessed the power of team working and that teams consistently fail to achieve their potential in most organisational settings?

A recurring theme is the difficulties that organisations experience when working cross functionally. Where successful teamwork exists it is mostly at the work team level. Certain project teams are also successful although success is mostly achieved through the single-minded focus and drive of the project manager than any particular team based skills. But successful intra team working as the predominant method of organisational integration and progress is a very rare commodity indeed.

There are a number of reasons for this:

- Most businesses are a hybrid of functional and team based practices. Neither one nor the other they often exhibit the worst aspects of both. Team based high performance organisations look very different to their hierarchical counterparts and the transition is proving very difficult. Maurice Belbin, the grandfather of team working, describes it thus:
- *“There is always the problem that when two distinct cultures become mixed the result produces the worst features of both worlds. Teamwork, or rather lip service to teamwork, has become very fashionable and a number of corporations have adopted this approach at the behest of their training departments, whilst at the same time their management structure retains their typically authoritarian character. This hybrid can bring about a great deal of wasted effort.”*
- Our experience would support this. In fact we would go as far as saying that teamwork as practiced in many organisations is counter productive. It slows down rather than speeding up or improving decision-making. It enables inter hierarchical enmities and frictions to be exacerbated. It reduces engagement by perpetuating procrastination and allowing team meetings to become melting pots for personal or functional agendas.
- One of the standing jokes in many businesses is “When is a team not a team? When it is the top team.” This isn’t always true but organisations mimic the behaviour, good and bad, of those that they look up to. If high quality team working to resolve the difficult and complex problems of running the business is not the norm at the most senior level how can it be expected to be the norm in the rest of the business?
- Probably the biggest barrier to cross-functional team working is functional politics which breed’s mutual suspicion and antagonism and the conflict that arises from non-aligned functional goals and aspirations.

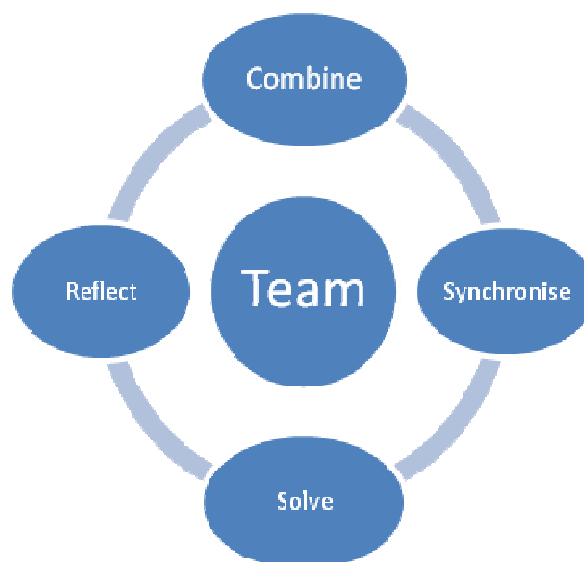
- The heart of the problem lies in a failure of organisations to really understand what cross functional team working entails, what the prerequisites are in their specific organisation to create a sustainable climate that promotes nurtures and drives team working and then to plan in detail for the organisations transition.

The Solution

To achieve top level performance within a team requires that they must have the technical, functional, problem solving and interpersonal skills to do their job and work well as a team. This requires that teams seek to learn, continuously improve and grow. Teams also need to understand what they do well that they can build on and what they need to do better tomorrow than they did today. They achieve success because of their willingness to evaluate themselves and change the way they do things. In short they need a mix of task skills **and** emotional intelligence skills.

To achieve top level performance in a team-based environment where individuals are consistently moving between teams requires a unique set of situational team skills. A set of situational skills that Sir Clive Woodward refers to as “teamship” the ability to work together in a team, the collective standards of team based behaviour understood by everybody in every team environment in the organisation. It is fundamentally the core set of skills for interacting in a group and governs the way knowledge is shared and input into the team, as well as shared cognitions about how the team should interact and shared knowledge as to the best way to approach tasks.

Our studies of successful team environments has identified that four essential elements are required to ensure effective cross functional team based collaboration. These are the core elements of “situational team skills”.



Combine

The bringing together of people with different disciplines, with different knowledge bases, different views of the world or different languages is a fertile breeding ground for misunderstanding. It is vital therefore that members of the organisation share the interpersonal skills required to move easily between different teams:

- The emotional intelligence to leave personal and functional agendas outside the door and the confidence to provide an authentic personal input based on ones own skills, experience and knowledge.
- A focus on dialogue (rather than debate). The ability to explore complex issues from different points of view drawing on participant's experiences and thoughts but going beyond personal viewpoints and prejudices.
- A desire for enquiry. The exploration of the thinking behind the peoples views to understand their deeper assumptions or evidence. Questions such as 'What leads you to believe this?'
- A willingness to converge on a direction and really agree. Agreement is not consensus which suggests that everyone has to be behind a decision before the team can move forward. Agreement allows people to move forward even if not unanimous. It involves articulating the agreement in a form of words that is acceptable to the whole team
- An ability to resolve conflict. Agreed mechanisms for resolving different types of conflict through a clear process for resolution.

Synchronise

This is the ability of a team to quickly align around a task

- The ability to quickly crystallise and define the task facing the team
- The ability to quickly assess the resource skills and knowledge required to complete the task and audit if these are currently available to the team, the criticality if they are not and where they can be sourced from and over what timescales
- The ability to identify and select the approach to resolving the task, the process or technique to be used, the plan ,schedule, timescale and responsibilities
 - What do we need to do? - Achieving clarity and synchronicity on the task in hand
 - What do we need to do it? - The skills and resources required
 - How do we do it? - The process to be employed to fulfil the task

- How will we know when we have achieved it? - The key measures or KPI's to be used to monitor performance

Solve

This is the ability of the team to work to a specific process to resolve the task. It is extraordinary how often people gather in a room and stare blankly at one another before circling around the subject.

- Methods, tools and techniques are vital for successful intra team processes some of the most popular are:
 - Problem solving methodology
 - Process flow charting
 - Pareto analysis
- The role of the facilitator is crucial as is the ability to centralise attention around the flipchart / whiteboard and lead the team through a process
- An awareness of the potential of group think – where excessively cohesive teams generate poor decisions

Reflect

“Debriefing is our single most powerful tool for improving performances. It is where we accelerate the learning experiences, where we share best practice. In the debrief there is no hiding from your mistakes, there is no room for anything other than total honesty, and there is no rank. The boss might get it wrong. The boss might not know that he or she got it wrong, so other people have to be able to tell him or her without fear of retribution. It has to be seen that admitting to your mistakes is a sign of strength and not weakness and that it is the way mistakes are eliminated. We are talking about a culture of learning rather than blaming. The debrief is about analysing what went well and why and what went badly and why. The job is simply not done until the debrief is done. If you do not debrief, you have to be prepared to make the same mistakes again.”

Justin Hughes, Former Red Arrows Pilot

High performing teams make regular objective assessments of the teams' performance to seek continuous improvement. Some of the teams we observed used a simple technique at the end of each team session asking themselves

- What went well that we can learn from?
- What didn't go well that we need to improve?
- How will we take each of those learnings forward?

An exercise that takes 5 – 10 minutes but is hugely valuable – it stops teams making the same mistakes again and again. However deep and more meaningful learning particularly the learning associated with developing emotional intelligence arises from feedback. Feedback from other teams and from individuals within the team.

The giving and receiving of personal feedback falls into the difficult category of H.R practice. Used incorrectly it can be irreparably destructive, but used correctly in an environment of mutual coaching where individuals solicit and act on personal feedback it can be extraordinarily powerful.

- It enables:
 - The surfacing of latent and inhibiting issues
 - A better understanding of the wants and needs of other team members
 - Helps individuals see aspects of their behaviour which may not be evident to them and understand how these behaviours enhance or undermine trust
 - Helps team members understand how they are perceived by others
 - It provides a framework for a team to encourage individuals to change or modify behaviours those they wish the individual
 - To stop doing
 - Do less of (moderate a dominant style)
 - Do more of (bring forth a latent talent)
 - Start doing

It requires however a vital set of behaviours around the process of giving feedback:

- Preventing comments that become personal attacks
- Not arguing about the feedback but exploring it
- Not being silent or non responsive
- Not being reluctant to participate
- Not being defensive or rebutting the feedback
- And a clear process:
 - Providing positives first
 - Being specific rather than general
 - Descriptive rather than evaluative or judgemental
 - Ensuring the feedback is something an individual can change

- **Environmental Factors**

The organisational conditions that facilitate team work are as follows:

- Teams are most effective when organised around whole processes where the team's individual contribution to a defined outcome is clear and where the team has complete responsibility for all aspects associated with producing a product or providing a service to a clearly identifiable internal or external customer.
- A team architecture lays out the purpose and responsibilities of each team within the relevant process defines whether it is a work team, an improvement team or an

integrating team. It sets out the team context - the teams involved in the process their relationships – and consequently the interactions that need to be managed to remove overlaps and potential conflicts.

- The team purpose defines why the team exists, the contribution it is expected to make to the organisations overall strategy and goals and to whom (i.e. other teams) it is responsible.
- Team goals should define the both the external objectives and the internal development objectives of the team and describe what the team seeks to achieve near term, medium term and long term.
- There should be a clear description of the team's decision making remit and the resultant boundaries such that it is clear on the degree of autonomy and empowerment that it enjoys.
- Compensation and recognition need to be oriented to team rather than the individual performance.

Fundamental to the success of team working is the redesign of the reward and compensation system to pay for skills development and team performance. The essential components of such a system is: -

The tying of specific pay rises to the regular display of new skills and the use of performance criteria that emphasises team skills, for example the ability to share information with others, to resolve differences effectively, to encourage and acknowledge the contribution of others, the encouragement of co-operation and team work.

The creation of broad pay bands to allow for significant increases as individuals learn additional skills. This structure allows pay to rise as employees continue to learn. A team-based organisation is by definition flatter than a conventional hierarchy and therefore progress cannot be measured by the number of steps taken up the ladder only by the addition of new skills gained through lateral development. In addition in a hierarchical organisation progress requires an increasing level of strategic management and the separation between operational management and strategic management is often synonymous with middle and senior management however good operational managers are often not good strategists. A team environment employing broad banding allows for the senior more experienced operational manager to earn more than the more junior inexperienced strategy manager.

Promotions or grade increases should be tied to the demonstrable display of new skills that show a growing capability to handle increasing complexity.

In more advanced organisations pay awards for skills development are themselves allocated by teams. Typically the integrating management team who collectively assess the rate of progress and growth made by individuals. The level of challenge inherent in this process overcomes the blue-eyed boy syndrome, which is prevalent in many businesses. Appraisals are therefore team based rather than held individually with the team leader and peer appraisals become the dominant method of performance assessment. The role of the team leader is to provide individual coaching whilst encouraging self and peer assessment.

Incentives should reflect the performance of the team in so far as this can be measured separately from the contribution of other teams. In practice this is very difficult in a hierarchical organisation but relatively easier when teams are organised around processes where the contribution of the team is clearly defined and the process output readily measurable.

Changing team becomes the principle method of career development with individuals moving to different teams managing higher levels of complexity to gain experience. A team based environment also makes it easier to put individuals “out on loan” to develop and round off skills. It also creates the conditions of fluidity within which people are able to move around more easily, to grow more quickly and ensures that talent when it emerges can be recognised and rewarded. An environment where it is the norm for people to move regularly between different positions and different teams creates freshness, energy and engagement.

Implementation

- The five step approach to implementing cross functional team working is as follows:-
- Understand current state of team skills, team effectiveness and the barriers preventing high performance cross functional team working
- Develop a model of the team norms the organisation aspires to and the resultant behaviours required
- Design and develop training programmes that focus on “situational team skills”
 - Combining
 - Synchronising
 - Solving
 - Reflecting
- Align performance management, reward and recognition and leadership programmes and develop a transition plan
- Measure and control. Monitor the improvement in team skills through surveys use heat maps to identify problem areas and develop interventions.