

Group and Team Validity in the Workplace

Effective groups and teams are both valid ways of working in the modern workplace. Neither team-work or group-work is a panacea. High performance organisations require both to gain high levels of performance not just in a few areas but across the board. To do this they need to understand the differences, application of and paths of development for both groups and teams.

Many writers extol the virtues of team work and in so doing contrast them with the ineffectiveness of group working. Describing groups as being individuals chiefly working alone with little connection to the mutual purpose other than administrative. An assumption then is made that teams are required across all organisations and group working be discarded. That is however contrasting what can be achieved by effective team work with undeveloped groups. This article will contrast developed teams with developed groups.

Team-working has been clearly shown to be a valid model for the workplace. However if a team does not develop effectively to achieve performance through synergy of relationships and inputs then it may be valid but it's contribution will be much less than expected. Groups if not developed will be of little use but if developed can and do provide a valid model for effective working.

Group and Team Definitions

Group Definition:

A small or large number of people effectively linked to a common purpose and who choose to co-operate to achieve it.

Team Definition:

A small (single digit) number of the group who are expected to work closely together to achieve synergy.

In the definitions are a number of important points.

- Teams start with co-operation and develop it further whereas groups achieve co-operation
- Teams are not stand alone entities but are in fact contained within a larger group.
- Group working includes inter-team working. However not all groups contain teams.
- Groups can be small or large whereas teams can only be small

Group and Team Development

Teamwork is not a Panacea

In many situations enabling a group of people to work towards a common goal with a high degree of co-operation would be the ideal solution and team working inappropriate. Here are examples of where team working would be impractical.

- Group size too big for team working – team synergy requires people to work closely with each other. Relationship building is very important. People have a capacity for how many people they can work this closely with. The actual number would depend on the working context and people types. However even in the most team friendly environments members would struggle to work closely with more than single digit totals.
- Tasks do not require synergistic processes – where the vast majority of the work can be completed effectively through clearly defined autonomous roles then there is little need for team work. For example a finance department more often than not works well as a co-operative group. If though the work requires high levels of creativity, mutual problem solving and not too many people are involved then team working may be an option.
- Same roles and skills – in groups of people that have the same roles and level of skill there is little need to seek high levels of input from each other. Teams thrive on variety and make use of the diversity of skills and approaches.
- Specialist input common – whilst team thrive on variety they also thrive on flexibility to pass on skills and knowledge across the team and to speak into each other's area of expertise. If the group has several specialists and it is impractical to pass on that knowledge then team working may be limited.
- Investment not worth it – if the investment to build the team outweighs the return that can be expected from it then it makes no sense to build the team. Groups of people who say meet once a month and then are unable to invest in relationship building and team-maintenance because of having to deal with a large agenda of tasks will not be willing to make the investment required to be a team. For example regional managers, sales groups etc
- Group split across locations – it is not impossible to be a team when split across locations but teams work better when on the same location. Split locations often lead to closer relationship on the same location and less close between locations. Effective teamwork would then require frequent relationship building activities cross-site and in many cases this would be deemed too expensive and intrusive on the work to be completed.
- Highly structured formal leadership/communications – teams lend themselves to informal leadership and communications because people know each other so well and each other's way of working. If however numbers increase and/or people are split across locations then the leader is forced to use a more formal structured approach which lends itself to group working.
- Personality clashes – in groups personality clashes can often be ignored, people don't have to like each other to be professional and work together. But in teams members not like each other will result in synergy not being achieved.

Group and Team Development

Group and Team Working

Group Working - provides a valid way of working where:

- Where most of the work can be achieved by high levels of individual autonomy
- Where large numbers of people are involved (higher than single digit)
- With groups of people split across more than one site
- With high numbers of professionals/specialists/technicians being present

Key challenges that must be faced and overcome for effective group working:

- Linking individual purpose with organisational purpose to establish mutual purpose and priorities
- Linking individual process with others to establish mutual process
- Linking individual support to gain mutual support and co-operation

Team Working - provides a valid way of working where:

- Where high levels of mutual problem solving and creativity skills are required
- Where conditions enable relationship building and maintenance of those relationships to establish trust

Key challenges that must be faced and overcome for effective team working:

- Developing teams that are outward looking as well as inward looking, that work well with other teams.
- Developing teams beyond the level of 'strong team identity and comfort zone' to a level of 'identity in purpose and performance choosing to step out the comfort zone'
- Developing teams to the level where they work synergistically and then maintaining that.

Group and Team Development

The development of groups and teams must be led and managed along different paths to realise their full potential. For years the author, in the early part of his career, developed teams in organisations across different sectors. The evaluations were always positive and measured demonstrable results. The teams performed at a higher level in their work, they valued the team and enjoyed coming to work, they related well to each other, were more flexible and creative in their approach and much more. However on one or two rare occasions senior leaders would comment that 'for all the team working you have done for us my organisation as a whole seems to work no better as a team than it did before!' In hindsight the author developed teams without developing groups. This will lead to effective team working but also can lead at the same time to less effective inter-team working (group working) as each team develops an elitist identity. Now the author encourages clients to develop the groups first, for they form the context for teams, and then develop teams that support the group purpose and values.

Group Development Model

Professor Honey provides an excellent three stage group development model. The three stages being:

- Chaotic
- Formal
- Skilful.

Chaotic phase being one that develops as soon as a new group is put together or after an organisational restructure. The formal stage is where all the key links are established to align the group with mutual purpose, process and support. The last phase 'skilful' provides an optional level only available if conditions allow to relax some of the rigidity of the formal stage without returning to chaos. For instance if numbers of people working together are too large for effective team working but still a number where people can relate to each other and know each other's roles then they may be able to reach the skilful stage. Christian Schumacher in his studies on work-structuring has found the optimum number of people typically for an effective group is 20.

Chris Fox has a rich experience in developing groups across different sectors and at different levels. If you wish to know more about the type of services offered then visit <http://www.create-ability.co.uk/> or contact Chris at Chris.fox@create-ability.co.uk

Group and Team Development

Team Development Model

Professor Tuckman provides an excellent five stage (originally four then a fifth one was added at a later stage) group development model. The five stages being:

- Forming
- Storming
- Norming
- Performing
- Adjoining

The forming stage develops when a new team is established or an existing team undergoes significant change. During the storm phase the new purpose is clarified, working methods agreed and relationships developed so that new team norms are created in the norming stage. Finally the team is developed from this strong base towards higher levels of problems solving and performance. In so doing individual talent is identified and developed and then 'planted' into other areas of the business.

If you want to discuss group and team development and add your own comments then visit the blog at www.releasingpotential.wordpress.com

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Group and Team Development

GROUP Characteristics	TEAM Characteristics
Common purpose often lost as people relate to more local team or individual goals	People aware of and relate daily to the team purpose
Recruit for technical and professional capability	Recruit for technical & professional capability and team 'fit' – diverse yet complimentary
Relate to individual profession or role	Relate to team identity
Technical/professional roles are key	Relationships are key
Technical training/professional development key to increasing performance. Instruments such as Belbin's team roles have little influence on performance	Development of expertise & flexibility of roles with roles built on personality preferences increase performance. Instruments such as Belbin's team roles influence performance
Small or large	Small number only (single digit)
Multi-location	Single location
Formal communications/leadership	Informal communications/leadership
Specialist/autonomous inputs	Thrive on variety and multi-skilled working
Typically competitive forces arise that need focusing away from members competing with each other	Typically co-operative forces develop that need focusing towards rising to challenges
Work can be completed through clear autonomous roles and co-operation	Work demands high levels of creativity and mutual problem solving
Trust in keeping agreements/deliverables	Personal trust in each other
Groups contain teams	Teams operate inside groups
Require group development models	Require team development models
Personality clashes if not easily sorted may be ignored and choose to be professional	Personality clashes must be faced and sorted to build good relationships or leave
Group Development model: Prof Honey Chaotic – Formal - Skilful	Team Development Model: Prof Tuckman Form-Storm-Norm-Perform

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