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Facilitating Teams Through Developmental Stages

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FACILITATING TEAMS THROUGH DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

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More and more organizations center around the work of teams — whether they be task teams or natural work teams. Much discussion has focused on what teams do as they develop from one level to another and what the Team Manager/Facilitator should do to help in this process. The purpose of this paper is to address how the manager's role may change with the developmental stage of the team.

The Manager's Changing Role in Team Development

Stage One: Orientation

When the team is in Stage One, everyone is new and inexperienced. The Manager is thus called upon to be a trainer and standard setter. The team relies strongly on the leader to provide structure and guidance. The objective is for the manager to provide clarity of the task at hand and to build the team's skills in the task. In a natural work team setting, at this point the manager's primary role is to provide technical training, information, and supervision and feedback to the team. In a task team, the facilitator's primary role is to insure a clear charter, clarify the agenda, establish task objectives and process steps, and lead the discussion.

Usually during this stage the team is delighted to get such clear and structured assistance and thus the leader feels that he/she is able to successfully influence the work of the team. Beware! The team is only feeling a form of "start-up" dependence, which will soon dissipate. As they move beyond this early stage and feel that they are getting their feet on the ground, they will begin to find such strong direction stifling.

Stage Two: Challenge

It is at this point that the leadership of the Facilitator/Manager will be tested, and his/her position must be resolved. This happens as the team gains more confidence about its skills and ability to do the work of the team. Additionally, team members will often challenge one another, so the leadership issue does not rest with the "formal" leader alone. This also must be resolved.

At this point, the Manager/Facilitator must help the team to confront their issues openly and not pretend that these feelings don't exist. This is usually a good point for some externally resourced team-building. An external Facilitator remains unemotional and objective about the issues of power and authority and can induce people to get their issues out on the table.

Additionally, such team building can help the group address the roles of all team members — not just the leader — and can facilitate the development of important communications and conflict resolution skills for the team. (NOTE: Such training is best held at this point because there is a "readiness" or need to learn.)

Along with providing team-building, the manager will often find a need to maintain strong direction — not so much over the task of the team as over the process of working together. They will be better at doing the actual work, but poorer at working together to get it done! Team building will provide a foundation for new relationships, but this experience must be reinforced daily by the leader if the new relationships are to be really established.

Stage Three: Cohesion

As the team gains more skill at its task and its ability to work together, the Manager/Facilitator begins to move out of center stage and into more of a coaching role. The focus here is to help the team increase its level of performance. To do this the manager must be a direction-setter, a source of feedback, a process skills trainer (in areas like running meetings, solving problems, etc.), and an interface with external groups and management. The team is now ready to begin learning to solve problems and make more decisions. This will not happen overnight, and the manager must be very careful not to expect the team to suddenly take on too much.

Stage Four: Delusion

As the interpersonal issues become resolved and the team experiences more and more operational success, the members often start to feel like they have "arrived" as a team. They are beyond the problems and it will be smooth sailing from this point forward. It is at this point that they will be heard to remark with pride and self-assurance, "We are the BEST team here."

For the Facilitator/Manager it is very tempting to join in this bit of delusion and simply relax. Don't. This stage isn't going to last, because people have an unrealistic impression yet of teamwork — they see successful teams as having NO conflict and NO performance difficulties. As the leader, you must do your best to keep your own feet on the ground and try to help the team do the same. DO NOT join in their bragging about being the best.

Stage Five: Disillusionment

Sooner or later, the team will run into some real difficulty, or the negative feelings that have been building up will break into the open. In either case, the team will be faced with the fact that they are still not performing up to their potential. They probably aren't the "best" team after all. They are disappointed at how things have turned out and will frequently show a desire to "throw in the towel."

As discouraged as the Facilitator/Manager may also feel, he/she must help the team move forward. To do so, the Manager must help the group focus on reality and not exert too much time dealing with interpersonal relationships. The team must come to have a realistic expectation on both the nature of performance challenges (we will always run into new problems) and on the nature of groups (even families constantly face disagreements and conflicts). The only good choice is to acknowledge that these things happen and that the "best" teams are those who know how to weather the storms and become stronger for them.

Sometimes this can be another good place for an external resource to help the team take an objective look at how it is functioning and be clear about where there are problems and how to address them. Additionally, performance measures can help the team sort perception from reality. In any case, the

Facilitator/Manager will find at least some of the team wanting him/her to reassume the authoritarian role of supervisor and resolve their conflicts for them. While it is advisable to provide help, taking things over will not develop the team further.

Stage Six: Maturity

Once the team has weathered the storm of disillusionment, they usually can settle into a period of maturity and acceptance. They respond to the difficulties and try to solve them. They do not have unrealistic expectations about being a team, but they do recognize their challenge to continuously improve. Now the Facilitator/Manager has to stretch both the team and self to higher levels of performance.

For the team this means providing them with new learnings about their business and the opportunity to influence more and more decisions both within the team and on other organization-wide teams. For the manager this means engaging in more long-range planning and interfacing with the rest of the organization. It is imperative that the manager acquire new responsibilities at this stage in order to allow the team members to grow into doing theirs. The team is now ready to continue daily operations with little or no close supervision; the manager uses this freed up capacity to work on overall operation effectiveness and initiatives/projects.

A Note of Caution.

It is rather easy to discuss team development as a straightforward series of stages. The reality of development is far more complicated. New members or sudden new performance challenges or unexpected organizational changes will almost surely disrupt this cycle and cause some recycling. A new team Manager/Facilitator will bring the team all the way back to the beginning again. (We would hope that such recycling is handled more efficiently each time through.)

In any case, even without disruptions, teams will develop in spurts that seem to suddenly revert to earlier stages just when you think you have made progress. This is all quite natural. Similarly, there will be times when the stages feel blurred and are hard to recognize. This may merely be a natural period of transition.

Given all that, the role of the Facilitator/Manager must above all be flexible, spontaneous, and situationally responsive.