

The “3 P’s and a C” of effective teams - Part 1: Getting started

Overview

Most of us these days are part of at least one team in the workplace. That team could be a:

- functional team - our department or immediate workgroup
- project team – this could include people from outside our functional area, people from other functions e.g. IT, users and other external stakeholders

Teams are complex environments to operate in and don’t always fulfil their potential. We tend to get stuck into a task – the ‘what’ – rather than the processes needed to complete it effectively and efficiently – the ‘how’. And when we do decide to do some team building, we often associate this with a ‘fun’ social activity. Whilst this can have value, the real work of developing a team requires day-to-day effort. We can probably all think of teams we have been in where members undermine each other, forget to share key information, and do not deliver. If we want to be part of a really high performing team we need to work through the “3 P’s and a C”. Part 1 of this series introduces the “3 P’s and a C” and offers tips on how to get a new team off to a good start. In the next issue, part 2 will explore what to do when an existing team is struggling to perform and also how to deal with the end of a team.

What is a team?

First of all we need to be clear what we mean by ‘team’. Here is one definition:

Guzzo and Dickinson (1996) - " .. made up of individuals who see themselves and are seen by others as a social entity, who are interdependent because of the tasks they perform as members of a group, who are embedded in one or more larger social systems (such as community or organisation), and who perform tasks that affect others (such as customers or co-workers)"¹

There needs to be a common goal and a need to rely on the other group members to achieve that goal. Sometimes we call a group a team when in reality it is a collection of individuals who have, for organisational purposes, been put together under one leader. If the individuals do not need to work interdependently to get the job done

¹ Guzzo, R. A., & Dickson, M. W. (1996). Teams in Organizations: Recent Research on Performance and Effectiveness. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 47, 307-338.

we can consider this a work group rather than a team. Why does it matter whether a collection of individuals is considered a work group or a team? Because the interdependent nature of a team brings specific challenges that need to be addressed:

1. Getting, and maintaining, agreement on the goal
2. Getting, and maintaining, commitment to deliver

Think about the teams you are a part of. How many of them have started with an explicit discussion on the two points above? How many have experienced difficulties along the way? How many have revisited these points when such difficulties have arisen? That last question is important. Sometimes we assume that agreement and commitment will always be there and yet any number of factors could change the way in which someone chooses to engage with their team.

Purpose, People, Process and Context

The “3 P’s and a C” are the key areas teams need to consider to be effective.

Purpose – What is this team’s purpose? Does it have more than one purpose? If so, how do these complement and conflict with each other? How clear is everyone on the purpose? How committed is everyone to the purpose? Might the purpose change over time?

People – What skills, knowledge and experience are needed on the team? What roles are needed? Who is the most appropriate person to lead the team? Who else might the team need to help them get the job done? Who is on the core team and who is on the periphery? What are the behavioural styles of those on the team? How might they affect the interpersonal effectiveness of the team? What constraints do people have, e.g. do they have commitments to other teams? How much trust is there? Fundamentally, what do we need to do to ensure that this group of people can work together constructively?

Process – How will the team communicate with each other? How will it share and collate knowledge? How will decisions be made? How will people be held accountable for delivering on their actions? What happens if issues arise? How will we encourage different ideas and constructive conflict? How will success be celebrated?

Context – What expectations are there for this team from the rest of the organisation and from other stakeholders? What constraints are there on this team, e.g. resources? How might these expectations and constraints affect the team?

If you are leading or part of a new team, you could start to address these core areas by:

- Getting the team together at the very beginning to discuss the questions above.
- Using personality questionnaires to understand the different behavioural styles in the team. Use of such tools can provide a way of opening up discussion about potential areas of conflict. Even simply asking people to share how they like to work and communicate can be helpful.
- Running a 'What can we learn from before?' session. This might ask people to share what they found useful in other teams that helped those teams work effectively together. It might also cover what people already know about the subject/task that the team is working on.
- Identifying communication processes and knowledge-sharing tools. Agree on who needs to know what and when. Find out what tools you can use to help reduce emails, make use of Web 2.0.
- Having a one-pager document which sets out key information about the team that everyone finds useful.
- Giving time to developing the team. That is possibly the hardest thing to do. Spending time on getting the team working effectively is seen as less important than getting on with the work. You need to do both. If you do not spend time on the team then the chances of working effectively are reduced. Lack of communication, too many emails, long-winded meetings, chasing for things to be done, and high staff turnover – all these and more are symptoms of poor teamwork.

Maintaining team performance

Once a team is up and running it is easy to get stuck into the task at hand and forget that teams need regular maintenance. Addressing the key areas at the start is not a guarantee that everything will run smoothly. Teams rely on the people dynamic and operate within the wider changing organisational context. In the next issue we will look at how to deal with typical challenges that arise during the life of a team.

In the meantime:

- reflect on the “3 P’s and a C” in relation to the teams you are a part of
- consider the effectiveness of these teams and what helps or hinders that effectiveness

- look for at least one opportunity to encourage greater effectiveness within one of those teams

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