

Six heads are better than one

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IMPROVEMENT – be it shop floor based, office based or more strategically grounded – is best accomplished through teams. A simple statement and yet the idea has still to find favour with some and flounders with others.

Why is it that a cross-functional approach to resolving one's problems should prove to be difficult to accept? Why is it that some teams never get beyond the brainstorming stage into real, measurable implementation?

Clearly the use of teams in all aspects of company improvement has yielded demonstrable success in very many instances. CATS and PIGS – corrective action teams and production improvement groups have resolved local problems; task teams have accepted a wider remit and worked to reduce inventory and improve quality; concurrent engineering teams have slashed time-to-market for new products. At all levels teams are being used to improve the competitive edge of the company and teams are at the heart of success with **Six Sigma** process improvement.

Their use brings other benefits too: a sense of local ownership through involvement, increased morale, a feeling of belonging and having a common purpose throughout the company. **People participating in teams feel they are going somewhere.**

So why do teams fail? In most cases it is because detailed thought has not been given to at least one if not all of four key areas:

- The make-up of the team
- The project definition
- The launch of the team
- The ongoing support of the team

If any of these areas are neglected then there is a high risk of the team being prevented from performing.

The Make-up of the Team

Everyone appreciates the need to consider the actual personalities involved on a project. Likewise, it is accepted that a cross-functional team brings to bear a wider experience and knowledge. However, what is often neglected is consideration of the nature of the team: is it to comprise full-time or part-time members? If full-time, how will the business cope without its best managers/operators being available for their usual function? (It would not put its least able members on the team would it?)

Many companies balk at the idea of a dedicated team to drive through a project because of the resource problem. And yet the question has to be asked '*How important is the project to the company's future prosperity?*'. Strategic issues such as the accelerated development of new products or the successful development of a true quality culture are too important to be tackled half-heartedly.

Most project teams are populated by a mix of full and part time members. There then arises the issue of priority and reporting which needs to be addressed. This will find resolution in a clear project definition.

Project Definition

There would be little point in putting together a group of people if there was not an externally derived need. Such a group would be a talking shop not an action oriented team. Invariably, this need will be embodied in the urgent wishes of a senior manager who is compelled by market forces or competitive pressure to make changes to the current situation.

It is of absolute importance that this person – the project client – be able to express his or her requirements in precise terms if the team is to be able to meet those needs.

The definition begins with a stated aim which postulates the vision of the client. The aim puts into context the purpose of the project, offering direction to those involved in the project's execution. The aim alone is insufficient without clear objectives, and it is on this point that most failed projects have foundered.

An objective should have two elements: a quantifiable result and a timescale – else it is not an objective. Some outcomes are not easily quantified, but can be stated as benefits, such as improved morale for example.

The aim must link with the objectives logically. Suppose for example that part of the stated aim of the company is to offer on-time deliveries. It may be decided that to support this aim manufacturing lead times need to be improved. This in turn may link to the need for small batch manufacture, and as a part of that the need for reducing machine set-up times may be identified. Thus a tactical action can be derived from the initial aim.

The project definition therefore has the following essential features: a clearly stated aim; precise objectives with quantifiable measures of success; an agreed reporting and prioritising structure; and a recognised project 'client' who is the customer of the project results.

Project Launch

The formative days of the project are important as they will influence the behaviour of the team. Thus recognition of the importance of the project and therefore of the teams' actions should be given at the outset. The project client is responsible for this. He should launch the project with an address and discussion with the team about the purpose of the project and its relation to the overall strategy of the company, whatever the level of the project.

Such an address could be offered in the context of the launch training programme. No team should be expected to achieve the desired objectives if it has not been trained in appropriate techniques.

Shopfloor based improvement groups need simple problem solving tools such as 'the six whys', fishbone diagrams and Pareto analysis, coupled with a problem solving process. Concurrent Engineering teams will need to appreciate the importance of time-to-market issues and get to grips with concepts like Quality Function Deployment, Design for Manufacture and Taguchi Methods. Six Sigma teams would understand how to analyse a system, be able to map the processes, collect and analyse data and eliminate waste from the activities.

Above all, a new team needs to be able to communicate. For major projects, this may well include co-locating the members. It is worth considering putting all team members physically together full time for the first month of the project. In many cases this has proven to be invaluable in gelling the team and in getting important, pivotal decisions made early and to which everyone is committed.

On-going Support

The final key ingredient to successfully using the team approach is the attention paid to the teams' efforts during the progress of the project.

The group will need adequate facilities to perform as a team – the time and the responsibility to act independently; the administrative facility such as an office, equipment, secretarial support; the tools with which to operate, namely appropriate training of techniques not given on the project launch.

Beyond that, the project client must be seen to be observing progress towards the objectives. Regular review will be necessary, both of an informal and periodically of a formal nature. Feedback, guidance, and occasionally praise can motivate the team, spurring it on to achievement.

Within the project definition, the measures of success were derived. These are used to monitor the progress of the project in a factual manner. They should therefore include a time-based element with phasing and milestones.

Summary

Very many companies can vouch for the power of the team approach to improvement of some company activity, be it shop-floor or office local improvement or be it a larger task such as introducing a new product or service to the portfolio.

Putting together a group of people in itself does not constitute a team, nor does it guarantee success. The key is in preparation and support of the team. The members themselves have the potential to resolve any problems they are given to tackle. But what is often missing is the understanding of the management of the importance of the four aspects discussed above.

With adequate preparation and on-going support, there are no bounds to what a good team can achieve.