

Defining High Performance Teams: Trends in Teams

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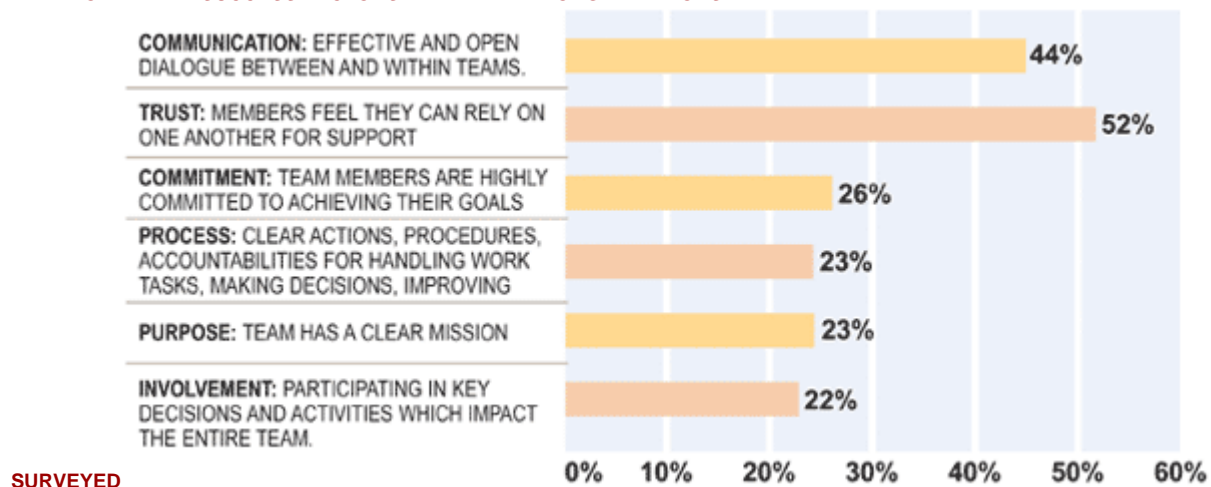
A recent survey of 70 organizations identified trends relative to the use of teams. Respondents provided insights about the prevalence of teams in their organizations, team responsibilities, and challenges and barriers to team success.

Team empowerment will increase dramatically. Respondents reported the degree to which team coordination (for example, selecting team members, performance appraisal, training) and team decision making (that is, day-to-day, job-related decisions) are primarily responsibilities of:

1. Management
2. The team
3. Management and team (shared)

Currently, responsibility is primarily shared by management and teams. This shared responsibility is expected to decrease in the area of decision making, but is expected to increase slightly for team coordination activities. Finally, management responsibility for these activities is expected to decrease sharply, particularly in the area of team decision making.

TABLE ONE: TEAM SUCCESS FACTORS IDENTIFIED BY ORGANIZATIONS



Communication and trust are key success factors in improving team performance. Respondents were asked to select the two factors that present the biggest challenges or opportunities for improving team performance in their organizations. Communication and trust clearly emerged as the two biggest challenges to improving team performance for the majority of the responding organizations (Table 1). Overall, the organizations agreed on the significance of each of the six potentially challenging factors.

Lack of support from management is the most significant barrier to optimal team performance. Respondents were asked to select, from a list of eight, the two most significant barriers to optimal team performance in their organizations (Table 2). Obviously, respondents believe that the environment in which the team is functioning is crucial to the team's success. Management support, good planning, sufficient time and resources, and a reward system tied to team performance—each is an important factor in helping a team perform at its optimal level. A deficiency in one or more of these areas could potentially reduce the team's effectiveness.

Organizations anticipate that the number of teams will continue to grow in the next several years. Given the anticipated growth in the use of virtual and self-directed teams, this expectation is not surprising. If

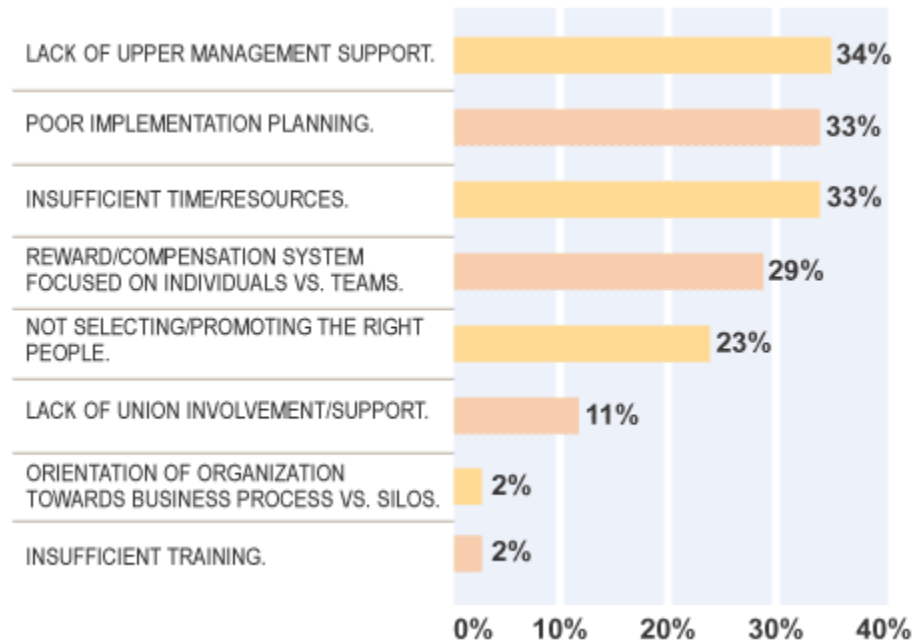
teams continue to operate more autonomously and off site, effective communication will be a key success factor for these groups.

Interestingly, North American companies anticipate much more of an increase in teams reporting to a leader than do companies in the United Kingdom. This belief may reflect the North American respondents' expectation that teams and management will share responsibility for team activities and functions.

None of the survey data indicated that respondents believe the use of teams will decrease or stay the same. In addition to the expected growth in the number of teams, responsibility for team coordination will become more shared between teams and management and will increasingly become the responsibility of the teams themselves. Management's role in these activities is likely to decrease significantly. Teams are also expected to take more responsibility for decision making. Sharing this responsibility with management will be common, but not as prevalent as it is currently. Teams will take more ownership of issues that directly affect them and will share more decisions with management. As a result, a shared leadership culture will develop.

Respondents view trust and communication as key success factors for teams. Nonsupportive senior management, a lack of resources and time, misaligned human resource systems, and poor implementation planning continue as other major barriers to team effectiveness. The continued growth of teams will undoubtedly increase the need for resources and support dedicated to planning and implementing successful teams. Creating and maintaining an environment in which these factors are aligned with team structures and goals will be essential.

TABLE TWO: BARRIERS TO TEAM PERFORMANCE IDENTIFIED BY ORGANIZATIONS SURVEYED



In addition to their need for resource allocation and support, teams also will be challenged by the need for effective communication. As the number of virtual teams continues to increase, communication will become a greater challenge than ever before, while also presenting opportunities for highly efficient and effective teams. As a team moves up the continuum to the highest functional team model—a self-directed team (SDT)—the need for training in key behavioral skills, like trust and communication, is also essential.

WHAT ARE SELF-DIRECTED TEAMS?

To appreciate how important training is to developing SDTs, one must first understand what they are and

how they differ from workforces in more traditional organizations. An SDT is a small group of employees responsible for an entire work process or segment. To varying degrees, team members work together to improve their operation or product, plan and control their work, and handle day-to-day problems. They often become involved in companywide issues, such as vendor quality, safety, and business planning.

TRAINING MAKES A DIFFERENCE

People who have not worked in teams before need new social and leadership skills. As team members, they are required to perform a greater variety of tasks and, perhaps more important, to work within a new cultural context. Their new milieu expects and rewards empowerment and team performance. What is the most common training topic for self-directed work teams? Problem solving skills: that was a conclusion of the survey by the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD). In one section of the survey, respondents marked the topics in which team members in their organizations receive training. The three most common subjects among firms that use work teams were:

- > Problem solving (72%)
- > Team building (61%)
- > Improving quality (58%)

TEAMWORK LEADS TO IMPROVEMENTS

The training may be paying off. Productivity and quality are up in companies that use self-directed teams, said most respondents, who were given a list of 12 factors and asked what effect the introduction of the teams had had on their firms. The factors that had “improved” or “significantly improved” in more than half of the companies were:

- > Productivity (77%)
- > Quality (72%)
- > Job satisfaction (65%)
- > Customer service (57%)
- > Waste reduction (55%)

Those results fit in pretty well with the companies’ reasons for using work teams in the first place. Almost all the companies surveyed by ASTD said they were looking to work teams to improve quality and productivity. More than half also cited improved customer service as a target.

Could more training make those improvements even more dramatic?

The DDI/AQP/*Industry Week* survey identified insufficient training as the number one barrier to successful teams. The ASTD study elaborated further. In 72% of organizations that said they use self-directed teams, training for team members is limited to 10 days a year or less, said respondents; that includes the 7% of teams that receive no training at all.

COMMITMENT VARIES BY LEVELS

The DDI/AQP/*Industry Week* study listed supervisor resistance as the second most troublesome barrier to the success of self-directed teams. The ASTD survey also cited a high level of supervisor resistance. Respondents said that commitment to teams is highest among senior managers and executives, and that supervisors are the least committed to the concept. The number of respondents who said commitment was high or very high at each level were:

- > Senior managers (68%)
- > Executives (66%)
- > Managers (62%)
- > Nonsupervisors (43%)
- > Supervisors (31%)

THE LEADER'S ROLE

Outside leaders face perhaps even more severe role changes than team members. In the past, the leader’s role has always been to plan, control, and direct. Leaders in traditional organizations tell

employees what to do and how to do it. Accountable for productivity and quality, they carefully oversee all work. They spend a lot of time fighting daily fires and little time helping employees find their own solutions to problems.

The role of a leader in a team-based organization, according to one source (Manz CC, Sims HP Jr, *Superleadership: Leading Others to Lead Themselves*, New York, Prentice Hall, 1989), is to indeed teach teams how to lead themselves. Leaders should receive nearly the same training that team members get. That includes such skills as interaction, conflict resolution, and problem solving.

Leaders also should be trained in the skills unique to their new roles, such as coaching for success, encouraging initiative, leading successful meetings, and reinforcing effective performance.

Training in those skills enables leaders to support their teams, keep them moving, and protect them from disruption; training also helps teams learn to manage themselves. From the start, training should thoroughly orient team leaders to the concept of self-direction and the ways in which their roles will change.

It is not uncommon for leaders in transition to experience fear and ambiguity. They may ask, "If I'm not planning, controlling, and directing, what am I supposed to be doing?" Part of their fear comes from feeling that they will become unnecessary. But Manz and Sims point out that the coaching role is crucial to team success.

Training should convey to leaders that their jobs as coaches and strategists will be even more meaningful to them and to the organization than their former roles as planner-controllers. If training can convey the personal and organizational benefits of their new roles, it will build commitment. If training includes opportunities to practice coaching skills, leaders will become more confident.