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Teeming with teams

It used to be said that skirt lengths rose and fell with recoveries and recessions. I suspect the popularity of teams as a work concept has some relationship to the business cycle as well. Lately, I've been seeing a lot more teamwork out in the field.

As businesses hunt for creative solutions to tough problems, combining resources, talents and backgrounds into teams has become a common panacea. Or, maybe when danger threatens, human beings simply have a natural instinct to find safety in numbers!

Teams have their time and place. Sometimes they work, sometimes they don't. We can't impose them where they don't belong just as we can't impose individuals on them who don't work well within that structure. I've seen teamwork come up as the answer when group work would do, I also seen rank- and-file employees working in teams be critical of executives who don't work in teams. Steeped in the team culture, they like to see the importance of individual leadership.

One organization I worked with decided to go the team route for good reasons. As an insurance company, it needed to provide

customers with complicated policies quickly in order to meet pressing business needs. The company, however, had a long, bureaucratic tradition of operating in distinct hierarchical silos. Each silo controlled a key aspect of the policy building process. As a result of these internal barriers, it often took up to a month to meet customer needs.

Silo busting made sense. But were teams the right answer? The organization thought it might be, even though it was concerned that teamwork might be counter to its values and culture. Sensitive to that, it went about the process very deliberately measuring success along the way.

Seventeen cross-functional teams were formed in order to deliver industry-specific customer solutions faster. Every team went off site together; set its vision, developed a motto and even a logo and came back. With its business delivery process redefined, the organization waited on pins and needles to see how it would transpire.

The result? Thirteen of the 17 teams functioned well and delivered the desired results, dramatically reducing customer service time and increasing satisfaction, Four teams failed miserably, however, and their leaders - valued, long-time executives — left.

The organization learned some valuable lessons. The journey

emphasized the importance of being aware of values during change. If behaviours had been defined in advance, leaders might have been more aware of whether they were committed and capable or not. The experience also suggested that sacrifices might be necessary. Another organization tried to impose the team concept onto its executives with poor results. Since teams worked well throughout the organization, it was assumed they would work well at the top.

Executives simply didn't mesh as a team. Was the group dysfunctional? The truth was, the executive "team" functioned better as a "work group." Mandating them into teams, redesigning the process of decision-making and negotiation, and imposing a set of team behaviours did not take into account the reality of how they did their jobs.

The fluidity (and politics) of executive relationships was more situation-based and necessarily changed with the dynamics of business.

Finally, a third organization came up with a hybrid concept. The need for this solution arose during a merger. Suddenly, team members were thrown together from two different team-based organizations). Loyalties clashed, frustrations mounted, and business results were impeded.

The answer was to acknowledge moments of leadership within each team. Individual contributions had always been key to team success but this aspect had been overlooked when team members were familiar with each other. The organization learned the importance of celebrating the success of the team along with the key individual contributor. This made intrinsic sense to all involved because it fit both cultures. The behaviours were there, they just needed to be called out more deliberately.

The team concept can be over done and overused. It does not fit all situations or all people. Sometimes we throw the word around loosely when we mean something else entirely.

Cracks appear when form does not meet function. When determining what form is right for your organizational needs, take into account the values and behaviours necessary for success before jumping onto the trans bandwagon. High performing organizations require a balance that fully exploits team, group and individual approaches.

Here are some ideas to consider when thinking about teams:

- Teams need common purpose;
 - All members of the team must buy into the common purpose and act according to their assignment;
 - Teams must fit into the corporate values (culture) before they are implemented;
 - Teams don't have to work at the executive level and could still be appropriate in other parts of the company. (But employees often feel "put upon" when they are mandated into teams while management still functions as a group);
 - Teams can deliver better results than individuals;
- Teams can and will be around a long time; and
 - Teamwork in one organization doesn't mean the same thing in another.

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