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REDUCING CONFLICT BETWEEN TEAMS

Thus far we have focused on designs and methods for increasing team effectiveness within a work unit. But often a major organizational problem is the lack of teamwork between work units. In fact, teams that become too cohesive and too self-involved may be ineffective in their working relationships with other groups with which they must coordinate.

Because of the importance of dividing labor into various organizational units to promote efficiency, such units are, and should be, different from each other.[1] Thus, context, the first of the Four Cs of team performance, often drives conflict between teams since such teams often have differing tasks, goals, reward systems, time constraints, and structures. These differences related to the organization's context naturally cause these teams to function differently. The key issue for organizational and team leaders is how to develop processes and a culture that encourage these different work units to work together effectively. One strategy for bringing greater integration between work units is an interteam development program.[2]

In this chapter, we explore the causes of interteam conflict and discuss various team-building options that have been used successfully to reduce conflict and promote cooperation between teams.

Diagnosing the Problem

An interteam development program may be appropriate when two or more teams that must collaborate for each to achieve its own objectives experience one or more of the following conditions:

- The mutual product or end result that both teams are working toward is delayed, diminished, blocked, or altered, to the dissatisfaction of one or both parties.
- One team does not ask for services or information that it needs from the other team.
- One team does not satisfactorily perform services that the other team needs.
- Team members blame the other team for many of their problems and feel resentment as a result of interaction with the other team.
- Team members feel frustrated, rejected, or misunderstood by members of the other team with whom they must work.
- Team members spend more time complaining about or avoiding interaction with the other team than they spend working through mutual problems.

Designing the Solution

If one of the team's managers sees dysfunctional interteam interaction and is willing to contact the other team's manager, he or she may propose an interteam development program. It is necessary to get the agreement of both teams to conduct an interteam-building program. If the managers of the two teams agree to this process but do not get the commitment of their team members, team members are likely to put up a great deal of resistance to the program.

The goal of the team-building program is to develop a problem-solving process that will reduce the existing dysfunctional interaction and allow future problems to be solved before a breakdown in team interaction occurs. A number of design strategies can be used for planning and conducting the proposed program.

In preparation, managers (or an outside facilitator or consultant) should explain the purpose and format of the program to members of both teams. In so doing, the managers should make it clear what the team interdependencies are (see our discussion on the need for teamwork and the nature of interdependence in chapter 2) and why it is important for the teams to collaborate effectively. Members of both teams should agree to participate.

Managers should set aside a block of time to get the appropriate people from both teams to work on the interface problems. If the two teams are small, it may be possible to involve all team personnel. If teams are larger, it may be necessary to have representatives of the two teams work through the problem areas. The following designs describe some options for an interteam-building program.

Design A

1. Appropriate members from the two teams meet to work out a more functional method of operating. Members are introduced, and the plan, purpose, and schedule of the program are reviewed.
2. Ground rules are established. One essential ground rule is for people to adopt a problem-solving stance. The goal is to work out a solution, not to accuse or fix blame. Participants should agree to look at the behavior of their own group members and identify times when their own members are trying to accuse, fix blame, or defend a position rather than solve the problem.

3. Team members in their own groups answer the following questions and record their answers:
    - What actions does the other team engage in that create problems for us? List them.
    - What actions do we engage in that we think may create problems for them? List them.
    - What recommendations would we make to improve the situation? In particular, since context variables (e.g., reward systems, structures, goals) are often the cause of the problems rather than merely interpersonal differences between members of the different teams, the teams should focus on how the organization's context may be undermining teamwork between the teams and therefore make recommendations for changes in the context. Because this often requires the agreement and support of upper management, recommendations may need to be made not only to the other team but to managers who have the power to make changes in the teams' context.
4. Each team brings its written answers and gives them to the other team to review.
5. Time is allotted for each team to review the work of the other team and ask questions for clarification. Agreements and disparities in the two lists are noted.
6. Members of the two teams are now put into mixed teams composed of an equal number of members from both teams. Each mixed team reviews the lists and comes up with a list of the major problems or obstacles that they think keep the two teams from functioning together effectively. Each mixed team presents its list of problems to the whole group, and the results are tabulated. The whole group then identifies and lists what they think are the major problems.

7. Members return to the mixed teams, which are asked to work out a recommended solution to one of the problems identified. Their recommendation should include what the problem is, what actions should be taken, who should be responsible for what actions, what the time schedule should be, and how to keep the problem from reoccurring.
8. Mixed teams bring their solutions back to the whole group for review and to seek agreement, particularly from those who must implement the actions. At this stage senior managers may need to be brought into the discussion to get their input and support if they are needed to help implement any solution.

The next design is similar to design A, but is a fishbowl design. Instead of the two teams doing their work alone and then presenting to each other, each team discusses the problems in front of the other group.

Design B

1. Group X sits together in a circle. Group Y sits outside and observes and listens. Group X members discuss the three questions listed in item 3 of design A. A recorder writes down the points of discussion.
2. Group Y now moves into the center circle and repeats the process while group X observes and listens.
3. Following the fishbowl discussions, mixed teams are formed, and they perform the same tasks as in design A.

A variation on designs A and B is to have the teams discuss different questions from those in design A. The designs for interaction are the same, but the questions are different.

Design C

1. How do we see the other team? What is our image of them?
2. How do we think the other team sees us? What is their image of us?
3. Why do we see them the way we do? The teams might review the Four Cs, which often determine how one group sees another.
4. Why do we think they see us as we think they do?
5. What would a more positive relationship between our two teams look like? How might we interact with, help, and support one another in the future to achieve our mutual goals?
6. What would have to change so we would have a more positive image and interaction with each other?

With this design, the teams should follow the principles of appreciative inquiry outlined in chapter 6. Members of both teams should be asked to envision what a positive working relationship would look like in the future between the two teams. As the teams describe this new, more positive working relationship and the benefits that would come out of it, both teams can begin to commit themselves to new ways of interacting with one another and develop plans for change.

Another approach involves the following steps.

Design D

1. An outside facilitator interviews members of both teams privately prior to the team development session. He or she tries to identify the problems between the teams, the source of the problems, and potential solutions proposed by team members.

2. The facilitator summarizes the results of these interviews at the interteam meeting. The summaries are printed or posted for all to see.
3. Mixed teams from both teams review the summary findings and list the major areas they believe need to be resolved. Major ideas are agreed on by the whole group.
4. Mixed teams devise recommended solutions to the problems assigned to them.

The final design involves selecting a task force composed of members from both teams. The job of the task force is to review the interface problems between the teams and then recommend solutions to the problems for both groups to consider and agree on.

Design E

1. Representatives of the task force are selected in the following manner: team X lists all of its members the group feels could adequately represent them on the task force and gives this list to team Y. Team Y then selects three or four members from team X. Both teams engage in this listing and selecting process. The result is a mixed task force composed of members agreeable to both teams.
2. The task force may wish to interview people from the other teams or invite a facilitator to work with it. Whatever the working style, the task force is asked to come up with the major conditions blocking interteam effectiveness, what actions should be taken, who should be responsible for what actions, a time frame, how these problems can be prevented from occurring again, and what method will be used for solving other problems that may arise.

Choosing an Appropriate Model

Given the variety of interteam-building models available, what determines which model would be most appropriate? One factor to consider is the confidence and competence of the team managers to conduct the program alone, without the help of an outside facilitator. If they choose to conduct the session alone, it would be wise to select an alternative that is simple, is easy to communicate to others, and has minimal chance for slippage in implementation. Design E (selection of an interteam task force) is the most traditional way to work on interteam problems and is probably the easiest alternative to implement without help. It is also the design with the least involvement of all the members of the two groups and may have the least impact, at least initially.

Design A probably is the most straightforward problem-solving format, with the least possibility of bringing conflicts and issues to the surface that could erupt into an unproductive rehash of old grievances. The fishbowl design may create reactions to individuals by the observers that may be difficult to handle without a trained facilitator. Similarly, approaching the issue through an examination of mutual images (design C) may also give rise to feelings and reactions that may be disruptive to one not used to handling such concerns. However, in design C, the manager might also elect to skip over the first four questions directed at exploring the images the teams hold of each other and focus only on positive images for change (questions 5 and 6).

Follow-Up

What happens if the two teams have new or recurring problems in the future? There needs to be some method for dealing with new concerns as they arise. It is possible to go through one of the five designs again. It is also possible to establish a review board made up of members of both groups that reviews progress and takes any necessary corrective action. This may take the form of a weekly or monthly meeting to track progress. To maintain the momentum for change, these follow-up interteam meetings are just as important as the personal management interviews and follow-up team meetings that we discussed in chapter 6.

Case Studies of Interteam Conflict Resolution

To illustrate how to use the various approaches to manage interteam conflict, we present two cases: ElectriGov and ExactCorp (all names are disguised). Although each case concerns interteam conflict, the methods used to manage the conflicts differ rather significantly.

Case One: ElectriGov

ElectriGov is a government agency whose mission is to supply electric power to various locations in the United States. To accomplish this task, the organization has three line crews of five to ten men whose job it is to install high-voltage power lines. Each crew is highly cohesive, led by a foreman. Moreover, crew members have worked together for many years and have an established pattern for doing their work and solving problems. The work is hard, dirty, and dangerous. Almost all of the men have had a friend who has been seriously injured or killed while on the job.

The crews typically work independently, but when there are large projects to complete, they must work together. This can create serious conflicts, since the crews often don't agree with each other's approaches to organizing and managing a particular job, and none of the three foremen wants to be subservient to the others. Thus when line crews do large projects together, they tend to compete with one another rather than cooperate. On one project, the conflict became so nasty that one crew failed to inform another crew that the wires were hot at a certain section of the project. This serious safety breach was reported to senior management, who immediately launched an investigation. We, as consultants, were initially asked to serve as part of the team investigating the causes of the safety violations.

After the initial investigation, we were asked by ElectriGov's senior management to "clean up the conflicts" between the crews. The approach we used to help the crews reduce their conflicts was a variation on design A. All three crews were brought together in one room, and the need for an interteam development program was discussed. Each crew was asked to commit to solving the conflicts between themselves and the other crews and to agree to give the program a chance. Once we had their agreement, each crew was then asked to meet separately to list their perceptions of the other crews and the specific problems that they had in working with the others. After meeting separately, the teams came back together and each reported its perceptions of the other crews.

In our consulting role, we facilitated the discussion, making sure that each crew's perceptions were made clear and that each crew described the problematic behaviors of the other crews in concrete, specific terms. As a ground rule, crews were asked to be descriptive and to avoid using emotionally laden language when critiquing the other crews. After each crew presented its perceptions, the other crews could ask questions to clarify points, but the crews were not allowed to debate the validity of the other crews' perceptions.

After each crew aired its views, the crews, together in an open session, were then asked to come up with recommendations to improve the relationships. Their suggestions were listed on large poster boards in the room. The crews discussed how they might do more advanced planning on the larger projects to determine who would do what and who would be in charge of the project. They also considered rotating crew members to improve relationships between crews. Most important, the crews agreed on a common goal: avoiding accidents at all cost.

At the end of this interteam-building session, each crew made a public commitment to change its behavior and implement the recommendations. As a result of this intervention, the crews now have a new approach to working with each other on large projects that minimizes the conflicts that they had in the past.

Case Two: ExactCorp

ExactCorp is a large retail organization with sales of over $1 billion per year. The company has grown rapidly since its inception and is operating in over thirty countries around the world. ExactCorp has been highly successful, largely due to its aggressive sales force, which is paid almost entirely on commission. Salespersons are encouraged to "always serve the customer" and think of unique ways to encourage sales. Salespersons believe they have wide latitude in offering incentives and discounts to customers in order to meet their sales targets.

ExactCorp's marketing department sets out the overall marketing strategy for the company. It also provides the product information, marketing materials, and promotional campaigns designed to help the company increase its worldwide sales. In other words, the marketing department provides the "ammunition" for the sales force to achieve its goals.

One day we received a call from the director of ExactCorp's U.S. sales force, Paul Jones, who expressed some frustration with the relationship between his sales force and the marketing department. Recently he had been reprimanded by a senior manager because his sales force was not "following the guidelines" for product promotions and incentives that Phil Snyder, senior director of marketing, had outlined. Paul had called Phil to express his concern that marketing was being "inflexible" and undermining his sales efforts. Phil responded that his role was to be a watchdog for the company and that sales was often "giving away the store." Phil believed the problem lay with Paul's department, not with his.

As Paul described his problem to us, it became clear that some type of interteam intervention would be helpful. In this situation, Paul's sales force was composed of over thirty salespeople, and Phil had over forty people in the marketing department. Thus, an intervention that included all the sales and marketing employees would not likely be workable. Initially we decided to meet with Paul, Phil, and Phil's assistant to see how we might get marketing and sales to work more effectively together.

Included in this initial meeting was also a senior vice president who was interested in having the two departments work more effectively together. It was the vice president who contacted Paul and Phil and got them to agree to work on improving their relationship. Although we served in a facilitator role in the meeting, the vice president was clearly in charge. This was a management problem, and our role was to facilitate the process, not to solve the problem for them.

In the initial meeting, which lasted about an hour, both Paul and Phil outlined their positions. Neither would budge. As we listened to them, it became clear that what was needed was a clear set of goals that both could agree to and then a process to achieve those goals. At the end of this initial meeting we decided to use design E: set up a task force with members of both departments to clarify the problems and make plans to solve them. The task force members would include Paul, Phil, and four people from each department. In addition, we agreed to serve on the task force as consultants, and the senior vice president also decided to be a member of the task force, at least for the first few meetings.

In the initial task force meeting, team members took a few minutes to describe themselves and their backgrounds. This was the first time that many of them had even met someone from the other department. The next agenda item was to determine the mission and purpose of the task force. Immediately the task force identified three objectives: improve communication and coordination between marketing and sales, develop programs jointly to increase sales, and develop metrics to measure their progress.

Moreover, the task force agreed to have two representatives from marketing attend the weekly sales meeting to give input to the sales force regarding their plans and to solve any conflicts between the departments. The task force agreed to meet monthly for several months to work on their three objectives.

Initial results have been very positive: both marketing and sales are working together more effectively to increase sales, and sales incentives are being coordinated more effectively than in the past.

In Summary

Interteam problems raise questions about the definition of *team*. In organizations today, it is not enough to build intense loyalty into the work team or department, particularly at the expense of the larger organization. People in different departments must collaborate, see the larger picture, and understand that the team must contribute to the whole, in order to avoid unhealthy interteam conflicts. Team-building sessions between teams can be conducted before serious problems occur to cement relationships and establish working guidelines. We have found that it is important to get work teams together and iron out difficulties using one or more of the designs described in this chapter to help managers and their organizations achieve their goals.