

Article 37 – which comes first – performance or engagement?

Towards Ten Thousand, our workgroup assessment survey draws upon many resources, not the least of which is my own personal experience as a member of a high performance team for a period of three – all-too-brief - years in the early 80's. Another valued resource is the book by Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith called "The Wisdom of Teams".

One of the central themes of this book, which accords with my own personal experience, is that the most successful organisations are highly goal and performance oriented. Furthermore, this goal orientation extends throughout the company at team and workgroup level.

Katzenbach and Smith identify five types of teams. They are:

- π Working group
- π Pseudo-team
- π Potential team
- π Real team
- π High performance team

In contrast, in ***Towards Ten Thousand***, we use the word "workgroup" as a collective noun to describe any small group of people that work together. There are six types of workgroup depending on their effectiveness.

- π Group of individuals
- π Embryonic workgroup
- π Developing workgroup
- π Established workgroup
- π High performance workgroup
- π High performance team

The least effective team that Katzenbach and Smith identify is the pseudo-team, which it characterises as not having "focused on collective performance and not really trying to achieve it. It has no interest in shaping a common purpose or set of performance goals. They (pseudo-teams) almost always contribute less to company performance needs than working groups because their interactions detract from each member's individual performance without delivering any joint benefit. In pseudo-teams, the sum of the whole is less than the potential of the individual parts."

Pseudo-teams, therefore, might display the trappings of "teamwork" but they lack the substance – and the substance is a common workgroup purpose and a common workgroup goal. They equate to ***Towards Ten Thousand's*** embryonic and developing workgroups.

Now the connection between performance and engagement is this.

As a colleague of mine puts it, "if people are engaged at work, they work harder, produce more, have less sick days, and have good old-fashioned fun". Yet a recent Gallup poll revealed that less than 1 in 5 employees felt engaged with the organisation for whom they worked. The implications of this on organisational performance are massive. The churn rate of employees is high, the costs of recruiting are high, experience and continuity suffers, morale declines and a vicious

circle sets in. If management ignore the problem, it not only won't go away, it will get progressively worse. So how do you tackle it?

The traditional way is to address it head-on. The program might consist of a sequence of climate surveys and training in assertiveness, communication, active listening skills etc, designed to foster a greater sense of trust and respect for others. The formation of teams is promoted as a key vehicle for improving "engagement". The whole program is overseen by HR because management sees it as an HR problem.

Apart from the cost of running an "engagement improvement program" as a discrete program in its own right, there is a real danger that the outcome will be the establishment of pseudo-teams that Katzenbach and Smith concluded are the least effective way of working together.

The basic assumption is that greater engagement leads to greater organisational performance. I don't buy that – I see it as the other way round. Greater organisational performance results in greater engagement. Moreover, it's an operational issue, not an HR one.

When the lack of engagement is seen as an operational issue, the fix is more circuitous but the sequence goes like this.

- π Review the strategic business plan. If you are not doing the right thing, how well you do it is immaterial.
- π Set an overall goal that everyone can relate to.
- π Identify all the subsidiary objectives that need to be achieved to make the "big goal" a reality.
- π Workgroups become the basic unit of the organisation comprising between 4 - 12 members
- π Identify the common purpose of each workgroup and set a workgroup performance goal that relates to the "big goal"
- π Develop a structure for each workgroup, its boundaries, its ground rules, the roles of its members etc
- π Foster communication and understanding between workgroups
- π Measure and monitor workgroup performance
- π Communicate progress towards the "big goal" on a regular basis
- π Observe how organisational performance **and** employee engagement are enhanced

The best of small companies display employee engagement in spades. However, it is highly unlikely that the company has ever run an employee engagement program. It doesn't have to. High levels of employee engagement are a natural consequence of working together to achieve personal, workgroup and organisational goals.

Is there any reason why larger organisations should be any different?

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