

Article 49 – Executive teamwork

“Team” is a much-overused term in organisations these days. There seems to be an optimistic belief that using the word will confer all the attributes of teams and teamwork on the members of any workgroup. Presenting the outcomes of customer feedback surveys to the client’s executive management group gives me a good opportunity to see whether the use of the word “team” is justified or not.

Let me give you two contrasting examples.

The first executive management team is made up of the heads of the various functional departments. Most of the feedback from their customers is positive but at intervals throughout the presentation, a number of the functional departments come in for some degree of criticism. The response from those present follows a consistent pattern.

Let’s say, for example, that the criticism is directed at an IT program that some customers find difficult to use.

Firstly, everybody looks to the IT manager for a response. Initially the IT manager attempts to rationalise the problem – it’s a very small number who think this way. Then it is pointed out to the IT manager by the GM that this same problem came up in the previous survey and it has not been fixed.

The rest of the management team say nothing and you can read the thought bubbles. “That’s his problem, not mine”. “I agree with the feedback but I’m not going to weigh in and support it – I might be in the firing line before this presentation is over”.

As the various issues are discussed, this pattern of behaviour repeats itself. One point that seems lost on this particular group is the issue of perceptions. There are, fundamentally, two contrasting reactions.

At one end of the spectrum, the response is that this particular customer perception does not accord with the facts as known to the supplier and so at best, the customers are told that they are wrong, and at worst the criticism is simply ignored. This particular group adopt the latter approach, sometimes backed up by reference to a particular internal statistical report that a team member has temporarily left the presentation to consult.

It is clear from the team members’ individual behaviour that whilst they may function reasonably effectively as a group, what drives the individual member is the desire to optimise his or her own performance and that of their department rather than contribute to the optimisation of the company’s performance as a whole.

Moreover, the organisational structure by function tends to reinforce this attitude. The functional heads naturally give precedence to the performance of the department for which they are responsible.

Contrast this executive team with another.

This company has a matrix organisational structure but it is the managers of the various processes rather than functions that are represented on the management team. The key manager has the unusual title of Customer Satisfaction Manager. This ensures that the other members of the management team are there to manage the processes that will optimise customer satisfaction. This form of organisational structure has two major advantages.

One – it aligns the whole company behind the aim of satisfying the customer and, two, it gives the management team a central and common purpose.

Since one of the outcomes from the customer feedback survey is a weighted index of customer satisfaction that every function and process contributes to, the management team has a common goal to complement its common purpose.

The primary loyalties of this management team are to each other rather than to the functional departments as was the case with the first example. Hence the dynamics of presenting to this latter management team are very different from the former and can be summarised as follows:

- π Instead of the individual attitude of – it's not my problem – the team “owns” the problem
- π Everyone weighs in with ideas and suggestions as to what the root causes might be and how they may be solved
- π Instead of sitting on the sidelines, those who are not primarily responsible for the issue under discussion make a contribution to the debate because they want other team members to help them when something that they are primarily responsible for comes up.
- π This team manages both realities and perceptions with equal commitment. Members acknowledge that customer perception is reality and if those perceptions are negative, they are not ignored. The issue is simply – how do we change those negative perceptions into positive ones?

These two examples demonstrate the extent to which executive teamwork is influenced by organisational structures. It is inevitable that the organisational structure in the first example will result in the behaviour depicted. In many organisations, however, moving to the structure illustrated in the second example is not possible for any number of reasons. Nevertheless, there is a way to develop executive teamwork even if the functional management structure is left in place.

The solution is to identify a common goal that requires the *collective* efforts of the executive team to analyse, develop solutions and plan for implementation. The sole criterion is that the goal should have a significant impact on the future health of the company. Here are some suggestions.

- π Setting a new goal for the Customer Satisfaction Index
- π Reducing order fulfilment time
- π Reducing overall costs by a stated percentage
- π Reduction of the organisation's carbon footprint
- π Increasing the percentage of recycling
- π Developing workgroups into effective teams
- π Setting a target for Employee Job Satisfaction
- π Reducing employee turnover

There are many more common goals than those examples above but whatever the goal chosen, it will need to satisfy certain criteria.

- π All members of the executive management team must understand that they and their departments have a role to play in its accomplishment
- π The goal must be a **SMART** one – **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, a **R**esult – not an activity – and **T**ime related
- π Progress towards the goal must be capable of objective and quantitative measurement
- π The goal must be one that both energises the executive team and the organisation as a whole
- π Executive management should hold regular meetings at which the sole topic on the agenda is progress towards the Goal

If you act on these ideas, there's a good chance that your executive team will act in such a way as to justify the use of that four letter word.

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August 2008