

The noted 1990 HBR article brought new urgency to the development of critical competencies. The 90's have also emphasized teams to accomplish organizational objectives. Mobilization of core competencies and effective teamwork are recognized as key to achieving sustainable competitive advantage. These topics are explored in this issue.

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Using Assessment to Enhance Team Performance

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Most successful technology organizations have rigorous metrics for assessing product performance and testing new technology. Managers in these same organizations also tend to agree that teams are an integral part of their success. But while they would never consider doing product development without being able to evaluate product effectiveness, few organizations have integrated strategies for reviewing team process effectiveness. On the one hand, the fact that team process can be harder to quantify than the physical properties of new technology, makes the lack of evaluation systems understandable. On the

other hand, the very fact that team process is more nebulous speaks to the importance of being able to evaluate and understand its impact on your business. The objective of this article is to discuss how to assess team effectiveness and how to use assessment to improve team and individual performance.

Assessment's Role in Supporting Team Effectiveness

A majority of managers realize by now that simply putting people into groups does not make them a team. It takes concerted efforts

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to transform groups of individuals into successful teams. Assessment is often a critical part of these efforts for several reasons. First, assessment calls attention to outcomes by forcing managers to deal with the questions, "What do we want to see change?" and, "How will we know that the changes have occurred?" In this way, assessment is actually an integral part of the up-front planning process rather than a back-end afterthought.

In our experience, organizations that have been most successful at transitioning to team-based environments have been the ones who strategically address these questions early on. Those that do not often wind up with directionless teams that can be breeding grounds for cynicism. For instance, one technology organization with which we worked failed to consider these outcome questions prior to undertaking a series of team development initiatives. Instead, they jumped into team leadership skills training for their project managers. However, the context and objectives for the training remained unclear. Rather than seeing teams and the training as a means to an end (e.g. improved product quality, reduced cycle-time, better coordination between design engineers and marketing personnel), many project managers reacted defensively to the training, perceiving it to be an indictment of their abilities. It was not until senior managers stepped back and provided a clearer context for team development that they were eventually able to make some progress.

Not only does it help in defining outcomes, but assessment actually helps to change an organization's culture by providing vision and direction. When you establish assessment systems you are sending messages to people about what is valued and expected. This message in and of itself can have profound impacts on behavior and attitudes. For instance, consider what we have learned from research on the use of multi-source feedback systems. Several studies have shown that simply introducing a feedback instrument can lead to behavior change, even when people just complete the instrument without receiving feedback or when all they receive is a summary of their self-ratings.

Another way assessment can support team effectiveness is by directly involving people in the improvement process and encouraging them to take ownership for team results. This is especially true when teams establish their own metrics for reviewing process and overall outcomes. One simple technique for doing this is to have teams create "Working Agreements." These agreements are simple codes of conduct defining how a team will handle fundamental issues like information-sharing, decision-making, and participation. Once articulated they can be-

come useful guides for managing and evaluating team member interaction.

Assessment processes also support team effectiveness by aiding in skill development. Team skills, like technical skills *can* be learned and developed. Carefully considered assessment systems facilitate this learning by providing individuals and teams with valuable information they can use to change behavior and improve performance. This kind of feedback helps in establishing development objectives and in gauging improvement over time.

In order to assist students in their development of team skills an increasing number of engineering colleges and universities have actually been incorporating team skills assessment into their design curriculums. Typically, students receive confidential peer feedback on team skills two or more times during the duration of team design projects, in addition to receiving feedback from course instructors. The increased emphasis on team skills assessment is largely driven by new accreditation criteria. These criteria require schools to demonstrate that their students not only possess technical abilities but that they are also adept at communicating clearly with others and at working on cross-functional teams.

While skill development at the individual and team level is critical, assessment also helps in terms of overall organizational learning. At this level, systematic methods for evaluating team process and performance enable organizations to better understand their strengths and improvement areas when it comes to using teams. It can also help them determine the conditions under which teams are and are not useful for product development. Using assessment to support organizational learning requires careful planning and constant follow-up. Consistent criteria need to be established regarding both team outcomes as well as process. The kinds of issues these criteria should address include: What team processes need to work better?; How can we make them work better?; How well have we done in terms of product cycle time?; Product quality? Innovation and originality?; How satisfied are people with their experiences working on the team? In addition, mechanisms have to be in place for ensuring all this information is fed back to organizational members in a useful and non-threatening way.

As an example, one organization with which we worked used an organizational learning approach to improve the quality of their design review meetings. After recognizing that their rate of post-production re-

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work on designs was far too high, the engineering organization made several modifications regarding how they conducted design reviews. These changes included incorporating team process management tools into design review meetings. They established facilitation guidelines to be used at all design reviews and designated specific individuals as technical and team process advisors in support of the primary design engineer. In addition, they also established formal meeting review metrics to obtain feedback from all design review participants. The information they obtain from this feedback process has helped them to continually monitor the quality of their design reviews and to make several modifications over the years.

In order for people to make team results a priority, they need to know that their efforts will be rewarded and recognized. Assessment systems play an important role in this regard by providing objective criteria against which to measure performance and allocate incentives. Ideally, there should be mechanisms for rewarding people based upon overall team performance as well as for individual contributions to team outcomes.

Organizations that are structured functionally sometimes run into problems because managers are not necessarily able to make first-hand observations of their employees' contributions to team efforts. These problems can be mitigated to some degree when team leaders or project managers are given opportunities to provide their input on individuals' performance and vice-versa. A key aspect of making this input credible, however, is to ensure that evaluation criteria are clearly defined and communicated in advance. Some organizations have also supported team development by creating special recognition rewards that acknowledge exceptional efforts by teams or individuals.

Perhaps the most obvious way assessment can support team effectiveness is through selection. Certainly organizations need to have clearly defined models of what they expect from potential team members in terms of technical competence. While most organizations recognize this need, fewer effectively consider team skills when assigning people to teams. It helps to understand individuals' inclinations towards teamwork as well as their present abilities. This kind of information should not necessarily be used to exclude people from team assignments, but to help ensure they are placed into assignments where they are more likely to succeed and or further develop their skills.

Techniques for Assessing Team Effectiveness

Having described some ways in which assessment supports teaming, I want to conclude by briefly describing several assessment techniques that can be incorporated into team development initiatives. It helps to use more than one of these techniques as they each have their strengths and limitations.

One common approach is to use assessment tools that focus on the competencies and behaviors of individuals, such as self-assessments and peer-feedback instruments. When it comes to team effectiveness the behaviors that should be assessed fall into two broad categories, those related to managing the task and those pertaining to managing relationships. Examples of task management behaviors include actions like helping the team stay on-track, regularly reviewing performance, and using systematic decision-making processes. Relationship management behaviors include actions like conflict management, effective listening, demonstrating support for others and helping others to learn. Some organizations have also incorporated behaviors relating to technical competence as well.

Instruments focusing on overall team process are another effective tool. These kinds of instruments should also deal with the same two general issues (task and relationship management), but the measures focus on what the team is doing/not doing overall (e.g. the team's overall ability to make decisions, manage conflicts or interface with other parts of the organization). There are several ways to assess overall team process. A team can use a specific questionnaire geared towards team process. They can also use their own working agreement. Another possibility is to aggregate individual feedback results of team members. The point is to provide some basis for a team to periodically reflect upon its overall process and performance in an objective, data-based way.

Interpersonal style inventories are also useful assessment instruments. These tools provide team members with insight regarding their personal preferences and perspectives when it comes to working in teams. They help members recognize differences and similarities in terms of their styles and work patterns. In our view, it is important that these tools never be used for typecasting people. Instead, we find they are most helpful when they serve as springboards for discussion, planning and adjustments to team process.

Here is one example of how a style inventory was used by a middle management team with vast project man-

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agement responsibilities. The instrument revealed that none of their styles were of a kind likely to be comfortable focusing on project details. This realization helped them to confront a recurring problem hindering their effectiveness. Specifically, they had developed several useful ideas but had consistently failed to follow through on the details of implementation. The insight provided by the instrument helped them to see the problem as a team issue without getting caught-up in a "blame game." Most importantly they began taking steps to deal with the problem.

Finally, no team should undertake its work without having some idea of how it will evaluate its overall results and outputs. It helps to use multiple outcome measures whenever possible. These include overall execution and results, as well as other criteria like development time, time to market, and quality. These measures need to remain top of mind throughout a team's lifetime. Teams should also establish and evaluate their efforts in relation to clear milestones and stage gates.

Summary

Assessment plays a critical role in both the creation and ongoing development of teams. This article has outlined several roles that assessment can play and described several assessment techniques. However, in order for assessment to be effective, it should not be an afterthought in your organization's team development process. When carefully considered at the beginning of team-based initiatives, assessment systems can serve as key planning tools and will help to ensure your organization gets the results it intended.

Authors' Biographies

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