

STRATEGIC TEAM DEVELOPMENT

by Dick McCann

Rarely do we find a team that is performing so well that it doesn't need further development. But where to start? That is one of the most important questions facing the HR consultant when planning a team intervention.

Over the years I have been impressed with the performance of teams which have many characteristics that are best described as "high energy". Team members are committed to high-level outputs and work with so much energy and enthusiasm that it is almost infectious. On examining these teams, I found that they had high satisfaction rates on eight strategic issues – questions that team members wanted answers to, if they were to go that extra distance and stretch themselves for the benefit of the team. With the help of my colleague, Charles Margerison, these eight strategic questions eventually became the basis of much of our work in developing teams.

THE HIGH ENERGY TEAMS MODEL

Who are we?

Each person brings different strengths to a team and will approach problems and opportunities in a different way. Team members need to know "what makes each person tick" so that individual differences can be harnessed to achieve maximum performance levels. The workplace behaviour of team members can be understood by examining their Work Values, Risk-Oriented and Preferences.

Where are we now?

Before planning the future, teams can benefit from a reference point that looks at its current capabilities. Important issues are the team balance, whether team members are likely to be risk-averse or risk-accepting, and whether conflicting values are likely to arise. A Situational Analysis will allow the team to look at its key Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats and to determine whether the necessary resources are available to deliver the Team Purpose.

Where are we going?

To work with energy, commitment and enthusiasm, a team needs to know where it is going. It has to have a vision that is aligned with the organisation's mission, goals and values. It needs to understand its purpose – what makes it different from other teams, what its outputs are and what outcomes they lead to. A Team Purpose Statement can be used as a structure for the team to determine its specific purpose and how that aligns with the organisational vision.

How will we get there?

To turn a vision into reality, it is necessary to systematically set objectives, action plans and measures of performance. It is important to plan the route from where the team is now to where it needs to be. The team needs to define and work on the critical tasks – those that make the difference between success and failure.

What is expected of us?

People find it difficult to perform if they don't know what they are meant to be doing. In a High-Energy Team, all team members will fully understand their job description, their role in the team, what they are responsible for and, most importantly, what they are accountable for. The development of behavioural ground rules aligned with agreed shared team values is also important to ensure team survival.

What support do we need?

Once the team finds answers to the first five strategic questions it can then focus on what support is required to deliver results. This means doing a training and development needs assessment and establishing ongoing systems of personal and team learning so that all team members can continuously develop their skills.



How effective are we?

A High-Energy Team is one that regularly reviews its effectiveness and continually improves its performance. Benchmarks for success can be established and procedures for learning from mistakes implemented. A regular process of Questioning helps prevent complacency from developing.

What recognition do we get?

In general, most teams will not attain high-energy levels unless there is adequate recognition for the accomplishments of all team members. This can be achieved through feedback, remuneration, fringe benefits and promotion.

The processes that ensure all eight strategic questions are integrated and co-ordinated are known as "Linking". Team members and particularly the team leader need to be effective at a whole range of Linking Skills in order to implement many of the gaps identified by this model.

Before agreeing a development plan with a team, I like to carry out a Team Needs Analysis where all team members and sometimes outsiders answer a number of questions designed to identify which strategic issues should be dealt with first. Sometimes the answers show up gaps in the "Who are we?" circle, sometimes in the strategic planning circles of "Where are we now?" "Where are we going?" and "How will we get there?" and equally often, in the four circles at the base of the model. By discussing the analysis with team members, they can usually identify where they would like to start the development process and as a result, they become committed to what follows. Two examples will show how this process works.

Many HR practitioners lack a strategic perspective when working with teams. Too often, they want to use their own "pet" approaches more often reflecting their own interests and learning styles rather than the needs of the team. A process such as Strategic Team Development provides an accurate road map for the ongoing development of any team and allows team members, in consultation with their facilitator, to pinpoint the underlying issues that are preventing the team from functioning optimally.

By collating team members' views on each of the eight strategic issues and comparing them with those of others from outside the team, a clear picture of the source of performance deficits is obtained. From here, the HR consultant can design an intervention in a systemic way, dealing with the source of the problem rather than providing a quick (and usually ineffective) fix to the symptoms.

About the author

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