

Municipal Advocate

The Massachusetts Municipal Association

- Customer Service
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PERSONNEL Management





Strategies

for Building Effective Municipal Teams

Public service can't be accomplished today without teamwork. The nature of municipal government is that it constantly changes and challenges groups of employees to perform as cohesive teams.

BY WILLIAM BROWN

A team can be defined as two or more people who work interdependently toward a common goal, each with specific roles to perform. One problem: Today's workplace was designed after the classical twentieth century factory model, not the twenty-first century need for customization, flexibility, speed and responsiveness. Innovation and transformation are necessary ingredients to adapt to an ever-changing environment. (See chart, right.) A new model wouldn't be possible without making a conscious effort to reinvent. The Information and Customer Model provides the best climate for teamwork to flourish.

Organizations typically consider cultural change only when they are forced to do so. Administrators who face the same kinds of problems year after year look for alternatives when conditions have deteriorated. The automatic reactions to deteriorating conditions tend to be finger-pointing and looking for a quick fix. When we step back to look at the larger context of our work environment, however, we understand how everything fits together, and we understand our own teams better.

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When team members and leaders work collaboratively, not only does their group win, but they encourage other parts of the organization to work more effectively as well. People take notice when teams mobilize. The power of

teams cannot be overstated. After all, an organization is an abstract concept: an entity comprised of employees working together in different groups. The teams become the organization. Of course employees have different roles—some

The Evolution of the Workplace

Industrial Revolution Model

- Slow to change
- Rigid hierarchy
- Command and control leadership
- Top-down information flow
- Individual efforts rewarded
- Turf/silos
- Employees seen as cost/replaceable parts
- Variety of viewpoints seen as disruptive

Information and Customer Model

- Adaptable to change
- Flexible structure
- Leader as facilitator; everyone takes leadership
- Two-way information flow
- Teamwork rewarded
- Collaboration across, down, and up organization
- Employees seen as non-renewable assets
- Diversity of perspectives essential for success

Source: "Road Map for the Path to Strategic Culture Change," by Judith Katz and Frederick Miller

are leaders, some are members. But there is one element common to all: the mission or common purpose. Building your own team helps you focus on what you can influence and compels you to consider learning as much as you can to be the best team possible.

Team Breakdown

Personnel problems are often charged with the following theme: “I have two employees that set one another off; they just don’t get along. They’re good workers, but they fight like children.” Or a manager will report, “Morale is low in my department. People just don’t like coming to work anymore. I can’t count how many times grievances have been filed. There is one main instigator, but to tell you the truth, the department head is not a strong leader. I don’t know what to do anymore.”

How does a leader face the challenge of getting team performance on track? Before anything is done it’s important to understand the developmental process of teams. Empowering leaders and members to learn the basics about teams will encourage them to develop new patterns of behavior within the workplace.

Unfortunately, our society often views the world from a “leadershipcentric” vantage point, believing that our leaders will fix everything. If they don’t, we fire them and hire new saviors. Leadership development is a billion-dollar industry, as we send our supervisors to management training to whip things back into shape. But an important dimension is missing: the leader is just one part of a system; we need to jointly involve team leaders and team members to make any real progress. Communicating as a whole is essential.

Lack of communication is a hallmark of team breakdown. (See Typical Team Breakdown Pattern, left.) When a town administrator or human resources director receives a complaint about a problem, adversarial relationships have already solidified. In situations where healthy communication isn’t taking place, employees tend to draw their own conclusions about what is going on in their work environment. In such environments, there is typically no system or structure that supports communication. When employees lack this type of support, the stage is set for problems to occur. Administrators usually

look for symptom relief to make the problem go away, instead of addressing the core issues about how the team or system is operating.

For example, a municipal manager recently needed help resolving a conflict between two employees. When he was asked about how the group as a whole was working together, he kept his focus on an instigator and a victim. Certainly individual performance issues need to be addressed; employee performance does influence a team. But we need to take steps to understand how our “system” is operating. Unfortunately, finger pointing and blaming is the human tendency. We live in a society that revolves around “who is to blame.” But team problems are rarely caused simply by a manager’s behavior or because of two “problem” employees.

Building the Team

Susan Wheelan, a psychologist and author who has done extensive research in the area of team development, refers to three main supports that need to be in place to create effective teams:

- Organizational support
- Leadership support
- Membership support

Wheelan offers checklists to evaluate needs in each of these areas. For example, when an organization has a clearly defined mission or supports a group’s access to technical resources necessary to accomplish its tasks, the chances are higher for greater team functioning. Similarly, when a team member encourages the process of clarifying goals, roles, and tasks, or works to ensure that input and feedback of every member is heard, again, there is greater likelihood of group success. Leaders play an integral part by facilitating open discussion and resolution of conflicts or by setting high performance standards. The engines of these three supports need to be firing, but it is the synergy of all combined that creates teamwork.

Behavioral and psychological theorists have contributed greatly to the phenomenon of group development. The group stages of storming, norming, forming and performing have become familiar to many. The research behind these concepts has been fine-tuned by Wheelan and her colleagues into four slightly different



stages of group development.

Stage 1: Dependency and Inclusion

Stage 2: Counterdependency and Fight

Stage 3: Trust and Structure

Stage 4: Work and Productivity

It is helpful to consider these group stages in relationship to parenting. Employees are initially dependent on a leader's direction and support (Stage 1). The need to be included is similar to the needs of a child depending on his caregivers for comfort. As an employee learns the ropes and becomes more independent, a leader's authority is challenged (Stage 2). This type of challenging is also characteristic of adolescence. Trust and Structure (Stage 3) represents a team coming together. Members of the group are clear about their purpose, goals, roles and expectations. The leader is less central to the functioning of the group. This stage resembles young adulthood. At this stage, intimacy with a significant other and joining the workforce are developmental challenges. In Stage 4, a team has confidence in what it can achieve. Problem solving takes place and creativity is expressed. Stage 4 mirrors the mature adult who has developed mastery in his or her personal and professional life.

The role of a leader mirrors the skill of parenting. A leader needs to provide support and direction with young groups, but as the group develops, a leader's role becomes increasingly peripheral—more consultative in stages 3 and 4 versus the direct influence of stages 1 and 2. Changing leadership styles to match the group's development level is critical, according to Wheelan.

Understanding Team Development

As leaders help teams understand themselves better, the teams become empowered to develop as self-sustaining groups with the potential to perform at higher levels. Team building involves stepping back and looking at the big picture so that the system can be fine-tuned. The opposite approach—focusing only on crisis intervention with personnel problems when it is too late—is taxing and costly to the organization. We need to think systemically about how our members and leaders

interact to produce in the workplace. In the example where the manager was focusing on conflict between two employees, the department recently had major turnover, which caused confusion regarding the job expectations and roles of employees. These expectations had never been clear in the past. Two key employees who retired had each held their positions for about thirty years; their jobs were automatic to them, but unclear to their successors. The conflict, seemingly between two people, stemmed from a breakdown in the system leading to role confusion and miscommunication.

Understanding how groups develop is critical to thinking about a team within a continuum of its development. Once you understand where your team is developmentally, then you can mobilize and make progress.

Here's another example: a municipality recently reorganized to merge various divisions into a unified public works department. Breaking down barriers that existed between the water and sewer, highway, maintenance, and engineering departments was a major change that challenged the heads of those departments to work differently. They had to confront a fundamental question that would guide their ability to operate as a team: What was their common purpose? The question was foreign to them because for their entire career they functioned as separate entities. Moving from an old system to a new one would require cultural change and investment from the entire organization.

Progress was made when they understood that viewing themselves as separate groups created barriers to successful work performance. A group exercise to help them establish common goals was a stepping-stone to create common ground. The momentum generated from this action has enabled them to work more collaboratively. They have also carried their vision and energy to their own departmental groups. The entire employee group had a history of being fractured, but the department heads have broken this cycle by modeling teamwork. An intervention for reflecting as a team shifted their way of working together from silos to an open system. The change has been powerful and has reenergized the public works department. ❁

A Team Building Checklist

Susan Wheelan has developed a team performance checklist, with a scoring method, to help team members and leaders build strong teams. Her assessment tool places work groups along a continuum of team development and helps them understand their strengths and areas for improvement.

Items on the checklist include:

- Members are clear about group goals.
- Members are clear about their roles.
- The group uses effective decision-making strategies.
- The group has an open communication structure that allows all members to participate.
- Members give each other constructive feedback.
- Members' assignments match their abilities.
- The group contains the smallest number of members necessary to accomplish its goals.

Source: "Creating Effective Teams," by Susan Wheelan