Strategic Developments International

Against Team Building

A Conversation on the Telephone

"Client: Could you help us in doing team building with my staff?

Me: Are you sure you want to do team building?

Client: What do you mean, are we sure? We've had meetings on this. The team isn't working as a team. We really have a need here.

Me: OK - I understand things aren't working, but my query is: a) do you want to be a team and b) do you want to build it?

Client (interrupting): Look - I didn't expect this questioning. We just want you to say you'll do it.

Me: Let me explain. First there is an issue of whether a group needs to be a team. Sports teams a) perform all their tasks in sight of each other b) are mutually interdependent and c) are judged successful if they beat other teams. I just wanted to check first if your group wants to work in this way. Secondly, my concern about the building metaphor is that it implies that a relatively static structure is built. It might need maintenance every so often but a building is largely a static entity. What happens when people (building blocks) leave? Does the team collapse if foundation members go?

I just think that these two metaphors - 'team' and 'building' - may need looking at before we move on.

Client: Oh!"

Of course I've not had quite as blunt a conversation as that - but nearly.

Another look at Team Development

There is a considerable literature on teams, team development, team building and team working. Also the idea of working in teams is attractive to a wide range of organisations. This piece is a modest offering to try to establish some distinctions in this field and to make a case for an enlarged, extended model of team development. I'm not going to explore techniques and methods but rather present a dichotomy of approaches.

Two category distinctions are quite limited. As the saying goes 'There are two kinds of people in the world. People who divide people into two kinds and people who don't'. That being said, there may be a value in a two category typology as a start to clearing up some of the problems in team development activity. Because, despite the apparent attractiveness of the idea of working in teams, pay-off from explicit, organised team development (e.g. the standard off-site team meeting) can be quite low - or even negative.

Team development badly done can do more harm than good. Negative consequences can include:

* team leader undermined by inept consultant interventions.
* issues raised which aren't dealt with: hence increasing conflict in the team.
* teams going down blind alleys pursuing a consultant's pet techniques.
* over-use of instruments and tests (e.g. Belbin, Myers-Briggs) so that the team's language and thinking is distorted.
* a team becoming closed and precious - and out of touch with the rest of the organisation - through thinking itself special and different.

Two Categories

As a start I'll make a distinction between two models.

Model I	Model II
Restricted	Extended
Team Building	Team Development Team Working

Some people would call these categories two paradigms or two different mental maps or two different perspectives. The labelling doesn't matter. My objective is to raise issues through this categorising - not to propose truths or ideals.

Against the restricted Model (Type I)

This model is restricted because:

a) It tends to focus on building a team in isolation from wider issues in the organisation. It is assumed that team building can occur irrespective of the culture or strategic direction of the organisation - or the markets it operates in. It therefore takes a closed system perspective. The team is assumed to be a system in its own right and to have an existence of its own.

b) Consultants working in this mode tend to have a limited range of approaches - or at worst only one. As Abraham Maslow once said 'If the only tool you have is a hammer you tend to treat everything as a nail'. But teams aren't all 'nails'.

c) Often only US ideas and methods are used: there is no cognisance of their ethnocentrism. I play lacrosse - and I've played it in the USA and in England. It is like playing two different games. In the USA the coach is boss: you work to set plays and each person tends to have a defined role. I've played in England in a team which had a series of US coaches. They'd try to organise us in the way they were used to. Players would agree before the match on systems and set plays - and then ignore them on the pitch. Our anarchic ways used to irritate the hell out of our coaches. Until they realised that they had to change their methods.

Not only do I think the model of a team is different in the USA but also its role. The USA is the only country to require a winner always in a sporting contest. Every other country will accept a draw or tie, e.g. in football. Hence US assumptions about the nature of sport (and teams) are different. So I advise people to treat all US literature with circumspection. Some of it is usable, with minor modifications, in other cultures. Other methods and techniques could be harmful in other contexts.

d) Emphasis tends to be on quick fix events such as 'Away Days' (which might be two days). There may be little follow through. The assumption is that once the team is 'built' it's OK to leave them to it. The style of consulting is 'hit and run' and short term.

e) Issues in the team are explored at a shallow level only. People's articulations of problems are taken at face value without exploring hidden agendas, power plays, status seeking etc. Naive consultants may uncritically believe criticisms of the team leader without recognising that these may be based on desires to subvert needed change, to settle old scores, to enhance an individual's role in the team illegitimately or just to be a nuisance.

Many of the tensions and difficulties in teams can be very difficult to explore and understand. An example in mixed gender teams is the problem of sexual jealousies and unconscious sexual desires. Sex, Politics and Religion can still be taboo issues to discuss openly - yet all three can be factors in team working.

f) Team building in the Restricted Model tends to be reactive: it is done because problems occur. There is little sense of a coherent strategy.

g) Consultants (and team leaders) may tend to focus only on structural change or on process change or on some other narrow facet of the team's existence. There is a tendency for consultants to see themselves only as experts in one domain. The person who puts themself forward as a 'process consultant' may avoid addressing issues around the strategic focus of the team, and the tasks it has to carry out, in order to remain pure and 'process' focussed.

h) Trainers and consultants often use exercises that are quite disconnected from work practice. We know that getting transfer back to real work situations requires learning events to be close to real work activities. Many fun exercises and simulations have a poor record of creating sustainable change inside organisations.

The Extended Model

In this model I'm suggesting the need to locate team development in a wider context. The consultant here takes on an open systems perspective, welcomes the chance to integrate structure, tasks and process and has a strong sense of strategic imperatives. This means consultants having rich mental maps which allow them to work with teams on appropriate ways to assist them to develop. It can mean the consultant sometimes fumbling and struggling at the edge of their capabilities in order to do their best for a client. This can contrast with the slick uni-dimensional (Restricted) consultant who confidently sells the standard techniques irrespective of context and culture.

Organisations that are moving to an Extended Model are looking to develop more sophisticated ways of handling change. They recognise that 'doing more of the same' isn't enough. Making significant changes into new ways of thinking can be enhanced with effective team working which encourages a reaching out and opening up (as opposed to Restricted Model navel gazing and closing down). A team working approach ideally means everyone knowing how to create teams or to slot into existing teams. Hence teams work well because people know how to work in them well. Teams are fluid and ever changing: they are definitely not 'built to last'.

The Extended Model needs therefore to take continuous learning seriously. Continuous learning has no place for 'learning curve' thinking. This latter mode implies that a new team may be 'on a learning curve' i.e. learning to work together and carry out their tasks. Once they've learned to a satisfactory standard they are off their learning curve (and hence stop learning). When people talk about 'being in a steep learning curve' as though it's a temporary phenomenon they haven't understood the needs of organisations today. We all have to be on steep learning trajectories most of the time if we are not to become obsolete. And teams face the same issue. They have to continue to improve through continued and continuous significant learning.

Two Examples

1. The Restricted Model for Purchasing and Supplying teams is of warring camps. Each team closes in on itself better to fight the enemy. Purchasers try to do best for their team by screwing suppliers on price, on delivery times, etc. The Extended Model is exemplified in the DTI/CBI Partnership Sourcing initiative and other partnership schemes. Here purchasers and suppliers have their own teams and also work together as a larger team to ensure the best results for both sides. This includes moving away from adversarial negotiating towards collaborative problem solving.

2. In the NHS previous (Restricted) models of team working may have encouraged professionals to work together but they excluded patients and the general community. Now some enlightened District Health Authorities, for instance, are linking with community groups to engage in joint strategy planning. NHS employees are having to learn to work in teams with community representatives and to acknowledge that in such teams they are not in the driving seat.

Both of these examples indicate the need for:

      * fluid, evolving teams.
      * strategic initiatives, not short term quick fixes.
      * recognition of the need for significant change.
      * widespread team working ability in the organisation.

The fact that such initiatives often struggle (and in some cases fail) shows the need for consultancy assistance of the Extended Model variety. Such consultancy approaches have to move beyond crass over-simplified distinctions (such as 'task' v 'process') and embrace new ways of mapping team working. As a first step the concept of 'team building' has to go.