Strategic Developments International

BEYOND TEAM BUILDING

I need to clarify what a team is before I can get into my case for a more sophisticated and more useful approach to team development. This may seem a bit pedantic. Many trainers and developers think that they know what a team is and hence often dive off into irrelevant team building activity. Indeed some researchers (1) suggest that traditional teambuilding is largely useless in improving work performance. 'Away days' and quick fix outdoor events may help people to feel better – for a while – but serious studies of team building (as opposed to happy sheets or self report 'feel good' evaluations) fail to find lasting performance improvements from the investment in such activities.

So I want to try to clear away a few areas where problems can occur before commenting on development issues. Firstly we need to recognise that not everyone needs to be in a team. There is a role for independent activity in organisations. Interestingly many trainers and developers operate in a 'non-teamy' way.

NATURE OF TEAMS

The concept of a team is linked to sport. For instance the first definition of a team in the Oxford Concise Dictionary is "a set of players forming one side in a game". The characteristics of such a team are:

- team members perform their tasks in the presence of other team members – hence allowing everyone to be aware of performance issues
- there is mutual interdependence – if you are playing football you need other team members to pass the ball to you – you cannot perform your tasks on your own
- the team is judged successful if it beats other teams – the team has no meaning separate from competitive activity.

In organisational life we have to be careful, therefore, in equating work groups with teams. Indeed one of the negative aspects of a supposed successful 'teambuild' event can be that the team closes in on itself and sees its success as beating other teams in the organisation. Such competitive behaviour can have a negative impact on company performance.

I mentioned that trainers and developers don't necessarily work in a team way. For instance many trainers work on their own in a classroom and others in the training department may not see the live task performance. Hence supposed team meetings (where learning might be expected to occur) become about interpretations of behaviour because the actual behaviour in the classroom is invisible. The reliance on happy sheets becomes a replacement for observation of live action. In a sports team it would be inconceivable that performance would be judged in this way. There is direct observation of live action such that much of the performance improvement occurs in the action.

An example of a team that does this has come from research on surgery settings in hospitals. There surgeons, nurses and anaesthetists do work together such that the performance of each is visible to others. The best of these teams appear to learn and develop in and during their practice. That is they do not need to have team meetings about what they have learned from a particular operation. They may learn and modify behaviour as the operation is progressing. Real learning takes place in the

operating theatre not in an artificial setting. Team members reflect on issues during the action and learn at the same time.

This is also apparent in effective sports teams. They may have practiced moves in training but if a new situation occurs in the match they learn from it there and then and modify their actions accordingly. Less effective teams stick rigidly to predefined plans and therefore may exhibit poor learning (and poor performance).

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

The last example does, of course, show that learning away from the live action has its place. Sports players and surgeons do need to train before carrying out their work. However they also exist in what has become labelled 'communities of practice'. In Wenger's (2) classic study of claims processors in an insurance company their identity was wrapped up in their relationships with other claims processors in a community of practice. They did not talk about learning, but when Wenger quizzed them they saw that learning is central to their practice – their work with others. They described their off-the-job training as telling them what the job was about but that they actually learned how to do it in the community of practice – for example from old timers through informal coaching. Except that again it did not feel like coaching – it was about everyday conversations.

This apparent diversion in to the notion of communities of practice is crucial to any consideration of team development. These more naturally occurring communities are often more important for learning than, for instance, artificially created teams. Hence one trend is to change the focus from team development to the development of communities of practice. It isn't, though, an either/or choice: we need to consider both. And in the process maybe we can develop more useful approaches to development.

Let me quote one case as an example. A major retail company wanted to improve performance by breaking down some existing barriers. The tradition had been for purchasing to buy products which logistics had then to warehouse and to transport to stores. Merchandising had to sort out the store end of the process and store managers had to deal with the problems that this process often created. A simple example would be where a purchaser would be offered a deal on a million widgets – and they would jump at the chance to order them. Then logistics would complain that they had no warehouse space for them and merchandising would complain about the disruption to store layouts. (The reaction of store managers was often unprintable.)

The strength of this mode of working was the creation of skilled communities of practice. All the groups really did work well together and were highly professional in their work. But the downside of this way of working was obvious. Hence new teams were created where the focus was on a range of products. So, for instance, one team focused on decorating products (paints, wallpaper, etc). The purchasers, logisticians and merchandisers for this product range were co-located. So instead of being on separate floors each team was located on its own floor. This meant that if the purchaser was about to do a deal for a million widgets the logisticians and merchandisers were right there and could instantaneously put their views in to the process. (I have simplified the actual arrangements somewhat in this description, but hopefully the general picture is clear.)

Now the new teams needed to learn to work together and we did do off site development days for them. But one thing we were keen to do was to make a matrix structure work. People needed to wear two hats. They needed to be a member of a product based team *and* they needed to be a member of their community of practice. It was important that the professional relationships that constituted the community of practice of purchasers or logisticians or merchandisers were

maintained. Indeed one exercise that we did in the off-site events was to ask people to meet in their product teams and to create hats that signified their team. Then they met in their community of practice and created hats that signified that community. Then they experimented with wearing two hats (sometimes literally) and reviewing how it felt.

This kind of exercise was only used as a stimulus for the main learning that occurred in the teams and the communities of practice. There were a range of other things that were needed to embed the new ways of working and the off site events were an important but minor part of it. In any case we mainly used the off site arena to address real issues. The artificial exercise that I have briefly mentioned was the exception.

This focus was in keeping with the evidence on transfer of learning (3) that is that little or no learning may transfer from exercises and activities that are disconnected from real work. This, I know, flies in the face of much training activity but it is backed up by significant research. Our focus was therefore much more on developing work based learning through such modes as coaching.

DEVELOPING TEAM WORKING

Despite my earlier reservations about the concept of a team as applied to work groups, I'm aware that there are 'real world' factors to address. Organisations talk about wanting team building and if I'm working with a client I have to respect their concerns and the language through which they express it. So I will assist with team development (provided that it is located in a wider strategy) but I do stop short of 'team building'. My reason for this is that the metaphor of 'building' something implies a static model. 'We will build this team and it will be a permanent, fixed 'building' that will exist separate from other buildings'. This model does not work. For instance many teams need to exist for a limited life; they may have been put together to solve a particular problem but they do not need to be seen as permanent fixtures. Also, even in supposed permanent teams people leave and others join. Fluidity has to be the name of the game. So the 'building' notion is one that I do draw the line at.

My interest is more in developing team working capability across the organisation. In the retail company I mentioned I hope that we influenced people to develop capabilities that could transfer to other situations. Having played team sports for most of my life, I know that when I have moved from one team to another, the abilities that have been demanded of me included:

- learning quickly about the values, styles of working, etc of my new team mates
- learning about the different strengths and weaknesses of individual team members so that I could work with them
- learning about the different roles people played in the team – team working is about bringing together different qualities not about making everyone the same (diversity is necessary)
- being prepared to modify my playing style to suit the new team
- communicating on the pitch and especially listening to my new team mates
- learning in the live action and adjusting to circumstances
- sensitively passing on my experience from other teams to my new colleagues, including timing such contributions
- and so on

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

In work arenas there are some additional factors especially linked to moving away from unhelpful competitive behaviour. This brings me to another concept that I find helpful. This is the idea of social capital. The basic case is that just developing the human capital in the organisation will not ensure high performance. People need to work together. The idea of social capital is that there is real financial value in developing trusting relationships between people. Where there is a genuine sense of everyone feeling in the same boat. Clearly teamworking can be seen as part of this. But only part.

A team can increase what is called 'bonding social capital'. It can draw people together in close-knit relationships. However this needs balancing with 'bridging social capital'; that is the links across teams and communities of practice. The trick is to recognise the need for difference in organisations – we need different people to do different things. And then we have to find ways to make connections across these different groupings.

One approach that we have used is learning groups of people from different parts of the business to develop bridging social capital. In the table are just a few quotes from three organisations that used this approach. The key to making such groups effective is that they only work on issues relevant to the organisation and that are of real importance. There are no irrelevant exercises or invented projects for people to do. And managers report that participants learn to be more effective team players as a result of this experience.

CONCLUSION

Team development needs to be put into a wider context. Narrow team building events that are disconnected from the realities of organisational life are usually of little use in improving organisational performance. Just because individuals like to engage in fun activities that allow them to escape from the daily grind doesn't mean that these activities will contribute to long term business success.

References

1. Hutton, C. 'Team building is not enough' in **Organisations and People,** February 2001, Vol. 8, No. 1 pages 9 – 17. He quotes the following also as evidence for his stance: Salas, E. et al 'The effect of team building on performance' in **Small Group Research**, June 1999, Vol. 30, No. 3
2. Wenger, E. **Communities of Practice,** Cambridge University Press, 1998.
3. Detterman, D. K. and Sternberg, R. J. (Eds.) **Transfer on Trial: Intelligence, Cognition and Instruction.** Norwood, NJ., Ablex, 1993. (For a good summary of some aspects of this rather technical research see Reynolds, L. 'Stand and deliver; keeping it business focused' in **Training Journal**, June 2002, pages 8 – 11)

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TABLE

Birmingham City Council

'Trust and openness developed in the learning groups. This in turn gives confidence and strategies to increase trust with other colleagues subsequently. In the new structures for governance, this kind of trust will be more essential between officers and members than it was in the past.'

'I have found new colleagues to help and who will be helpful to me'.

'The learning group showed how relationships with others need to develop in order to meet the Council's objectives'.

'Networking with learning group members has opened doors.'

PPP healthcare

'In the past a lot of my learning has been with me as an island, or with me just talking to my boss. The relationship is not as open as the relationship [in the learning group] where there is not that formal hierarchy.   Being in a relationship with peers, I can discuss openly ideas, actions.   They can challenge me, build on them, suggest observations which I've not considered myself and suggest other things they've encountered themselves that they think will be of value to me.'

'One of the most wonderful things about this process is that through the learning groups and discussions, you're creating corporate knowledge.   And, because you make things explicit, things happen.   If you share the knowledge and ideas you have, or if people talk about things they want to do, things happen.   Organisational knowledge is created when tacit knowledge becomes explicit - when it is shared and articulated through socialisation within the learning group.'

NOP Research Group

'We can share issues more openly and we are less defensive.'

'By sharing ideas we are more innovative and also avoid making mistakes that have been made before.'

'The company now seems a friendlier place.'

'My junior staff are now more capable and confident in their dealings with both internal staff and more importantly external clients.'