

Work Teams: Internal and External Influences on Performance

By Todd Harris



Dr. Todd Harris is Director of Research at PI Worldwide and an expert in industrial and organizational psychology. He has advised clients, ranging from small businesses to Fortune 100 Companies, on leadership, personality assessment and talent management.

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Organizations throughout the world have increasingly adopted team-based work structures. Consider the following points:

- ◆ As many as half of the Fortune 500 use formal work teams in some part of their operations
- ◆ 85% of Fortune 1000 firms employ some element of group-based compensation
- ◆ Studies of managers show that they spend 30 to 80 percent of their time in team meetings
- ◆ A Fortune 500 financial services company found that their average executive spent two out of every five working days collaborating with small groups
- ◆ As many as 11 million meetings occur daily in North America

Most models of the organization of the future are premised on teams surpassing individuals as the primary performance unit in the company. Clearly, changes in the world of work such as advances in information technology, globalization, hyper-competition, knowledge-based work, and worker empowerment will mean the workplace of the future will be much more collaborative than its predecessor. The challenging economic environment that many companies are now facing puts an even larger premium on effective team performance.

Unfortunately, many organizations have found that teams are not a universal panacea. In fact, academics and management consultants often cite a “50% failure rate” for teams – in that half of work teams fail to achieve their goals. To perform well, a team must surmount three hurdles. It must (1) exert sufficient effort to accomplish the task at an acceptable level of performance, (2) bring adequate knowledge, skill and ability to bear on the task work, and (3) employ task performance strategies that are appropriate to the work and to the setting in which it is being performed. Performance on these three “hurdles” will be influenced by factors that are both “internal” to the team and factors that are “external” to the team.

Internal team factors to consider

Task Structure: Is the team task clear, consistent with the team’s purpose, and aligned with important organizational goals? Does the team have a meaningful piece of work to do for which members share responsibility and accountability and that provides opportunities for the team to learn how well it is doing? Is the outcome that the team is seeking clearly understood by each of the members?

Team Composition: Is the team well staffed? Is it the right size, given the work to be done? Do members have the expertise required to perform the task well? Do they have sufficient interpersonal skill to function collaboratively? Are team members so similar in background and perspectives that there is little for them to learn from one another? Or are they so different that they risk having difficulty communicating and coordinating with one another?

Core Norms: Expectations of what is “acceptable” team behavior tend either to be “imported” to the team by members or established very early in the team’s lifespan. Articulating these

“norms” ahead of time via a “team charter” or “team vision statement” can be very helpful, and should cover areas such as how the team will make decisions, communicate and evaluate itself.

Decision Making: Does the team have an appropriate process in place for making decisions, and does it in fact adhere to that process?

External team factors to consider

Reward System: Does the company’s reward system provide recognition, reinforcement and compensation that are contingent on team performance? Are rewards administered to the team as a whole or to individuals within the team? Does the reward system truly encourage team members to work collaboratively?

Educational System: Is training or technical assistance available to the team for any aspects of the work for which members do not already have adequate knowledge, skill or experience?

Information System: Does the team have ready access to the data, tools and other resources that enable superior performance?

Organizational Culture: Does the company for which the team works have a collaborative culture that genuinely fosters and supports teams? Or is it a culture that still promotes and recognizes individual achievement? Do the company’s top leaders really “buy-into” the concept of teams?

In summary, those who create, lead and evaluate work teams in organizations should focus their efforts on these internal and external factors that support effective team performance.

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Linkage
Burlington, MA
781.402.5555
info@linkageinc.com