



Team building that focuses on causes, not just symptoms

The trouble with a lot of team building initiatives is that they treat symptoms, not the root causes, of organizational conflict.

People often cite factors such as “lack of communication” or “management tension” as the presenting problems for engaging in team building exercises. To solve these problems, people go off-site for a day or two, participate in “feel good” workshops that focus on understanding their differences, and return to the workplace with a better understanding and appreciation of one another -- for a little while. Six, nine, 12 months later, the problems continue to negatively impact performance because the team building initiative never addressed the root causes.

Situation Analysis

Recently, a large publishing company asked us to help its executive team resolve differences that were becoming more and more of a problem for the organization. The desired outcomes included improved conflict management, better day-to-day communications, and greater cohesiveness.

Our approach was to identify and treat the underlying causes responsible for these symptoms by analyzing the impact of the leadership team on the organization.

Getting to the Root

Symptoms

- Frequent, unresolved conflicts
- Poor communications
- Low trust
- Team distracts rather than adds to individual member impact
- Poor decision-making
- Changing priorities or inability to prioritize

Underlying Causes

- Team's performance doesn't meet expectations
- Conflict of values: what's important
- Lack of accountability
- Team doesn't understand its impact on organization's culture

Studies have shown that a lack of cohesiveness among top management correlates with lower productivity throughout the organization.

For example, research by The Gallup Organization and others has demonstrated that employees who are “fully engaged” -- that is, employees who form an abiding bond with a nurturing, supportive organization -- contribute more to the bottom line than those who are not. When top management has problems, the whole organization notices -- and suffers.

WJM Associates' Approach

Our first step toward helping this client was to measure the team's effect on the organization through a process we call the Team Impact Analysis (TIA). Our approach tries to answer several questions, including:

- What is the effect of the management team, individually and collectively, on employee enthusiasm and productivity?



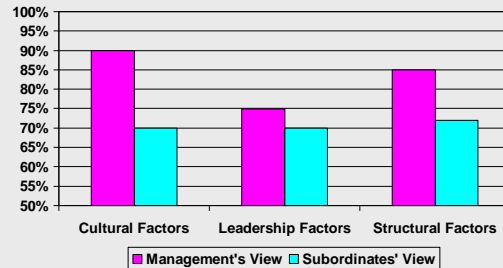
- How attuned is the team to what is working well and what isn't throughout the organization?
- Are the problems isolated or systemic?

The TIA is a performance-based process that groups a variety of organizational competencies into five clusters. Each of the five focuses on different components of employee engagement. The most critical component is the organization's ability to learn, which is measured by tracking progress over time through a proprietary progress-review mechanism.

By asking executives and employees to rate both the importance and effectiveness of these factors, we are able to differentiate between what is both important and urgent, rather than what is urgent, but relatively unimportant — what we call the “thorn in the side” factors. Dividing effectiveness by importance yields a “proficiency rating” that enables us to gauge the extent to which the management team is attuned to the issues facing the organization.

The results can be quite dramatic. For example, in our analysis of the client's cultural factors -- which measure proficiency in areas such as employee recognition, relationships with management, and receptiveness to new ideas -- management gave itself an overall average proficiency rating of 90%. The executive team was stunned to learn that the rest of the organization rated its average performance on cultural factors only at 70%.

Stunning Difference



This substantial difference helped management focus on the true cause of its problems -- a lack of agreement on organizational values and low emotional intelligence skills, combined with frustration among both staff and team members because they were not being held mutually accountable for leadership and management behaviors.

Management Report Cards

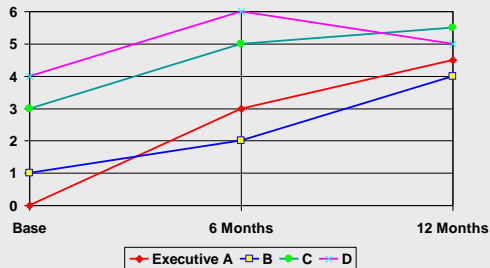
The TIA yielded other benefits as well. Because we gathered proficiency ratings for each member of management from their peers and subordinates, we were able to provide individual executives with their own “report cards” showing how they and others rated their performance.

This enabled us to create individual development plans for each executive to reduce the gaps in the ratings and measure progress over time. Each executive identified several competencies that needed improvement, and set six- and 12-month target proficiency goals.

By going back to the executives' subordinates and peers and asking them to update their ratings on each team member's targeted competencies at six-month intervals, we were able to document significant rates of progress.



Measuring Progress



This process also engendered a friendly competitive spirit among the leadership team – everyone was motivated to demonstrate improvement, and, obviously, no one wanted to rank “last.” While initial baseline measures did not impact the executives’ performance awards, the results of the progress reviews were factored into the calculation of their annual performance bonuses. (It is noteworthy that the team

member with the highest rate of progress was the one who received systematic coaching.)

Conclusion

Team building is an important tool for enhancing management performance, but it is most effective when it addresses the impact of the team on the productivity of the organization, and focuses on the underlying causes, rather than the symptoms or aggravating factors.

Using a process like the Team Impact Analysis not only gets to the root of the problem, but it also provides a way to measure progress over time.

For further information, please contact WJM Associates, Inc., 675 Third Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017, 212-972-7400, info@wjmassoc.com.