

Cross-Functional Teams

Even though a high proportion of OD team interventions involve working with what we call "intact work teams" (or "formal work groups," or "natural teams"), OD interventions are also applicable to other team configurations. In particular, cross-functional (or multifunctional) teams are widely used in organizations, and OD approaches have great utility in the formation and ongoing functioning of these teams.

Cross-functional teams are typically comprised of individuals who have a functional home base—e.g., manufacturing, design, engineering, or marketing, etc.—but who meet regularly to solve ongoing challenges requiring input from a number of functional areas. Such cross-functional teams might be *permanent*, but *temporary* teams can be created to solve short-term problems. Temporary teams might tackle problems such as planning a product changeover or solving a key customer problem.³

Large companies such as Motorola, Ford, 3M, and General Electric, as well as many small and medium-sized organizations, have used cross-functional teams.⁴ As a specific example, in the development of the Saturn automobile at General Motors, cross-functional teams were used from the outset. Rather than have one functional team (say, design) do its work and then "throw the plans over the wall" to the next functional team (say, production), cross-functional teams provide oversight throughout the entire project.⁵ In his book, *Thriving on Chaos*, Tom Peters advocates increasing the use of cross-functional teams as a means for U.S. industry to compete successfully in today's fast-paced environment.⁶

* Effective Teams

Early writers who directed attention to the importance of team functioning included Rensis Likert and Douglas McGregor. Likert, for example, suggested that organizations are best conceptualized by systems of interlocking groups connected by *linking pins*—individuals who occupy membership in two groups by being a boss in one group and a subordinate in another.⁷ Through these interlocking groups the work of the organization gets done. The key reality seems to be that individuals in organizations function not so much as *individuals* alone but as *members* of groups or teams. For an individual to function effectively, frequently a prerequisite is that the team must function effectively.

Both Likert and McGregor identified some of the characteristics of well-functioning, effective groups (teams). McGregor's list of characteristics is as follows:

- The atmosphere tends to be relaxed, comfortable, and informal.
- The group's task is well understood and accepted by the members.
- The members listen well to each other; there is a lot of task-relevant discussion in which most members participate.
- People express both their feelings and ideas.
- Conflict and disagreement are present but are centered around ideas and methods, not personalities and people.
- The group is self-conscious about its own operation.
- Decisions are usually based on consensus, not majority vote.

...and accepted by the members.⁸

According to McGregor, when these conditions are met, the team is likely to be successful in accomplishing its mission and simultaneously satisfying the personal and interpersonal needs of its members.

Later writers and researchers have built on the work of McGregor, Likert, and others to specify the dimensions of team effectiveness. In chapter 5 we listed eight characteristics that Carl Larson and Frank LaFasto found in high-performance teams.⁹ Glenn Parker also looked at the characteristics of effective teams and developed a similar list. Here is his list. (Our explanations are in brackets.)

CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EFFECTIVE TEAM

- Clear purpose* [defined and accepted vision, mission, goal or task, and an action plan]
- Informality* [informal, comfortable, and relaxed]
- Participation* [much discussion with everyone encouraged to participate]
- Listening* [use of effective listening techniques such as questioning, paraphrasing, and summarizing]
- Civilized disagreement* [team is comfortable with disagreement; does not avoid, smooth over, or suppress conflict]
- Consensus decision making* [substantial agreement through thorough discussion, avoidance of voting]
- Open communications* [feelings seen as legitimate, few hidden agendas]
- Clear roles and work assignments* [clear expectations and work evenly divided]
- Shared leadership* [in addition to a formal leader, everyone shares in effective leadership behaviors]
- External relations* [the team pays attention to developing outside relationships, resources, credibility]
- Style diversity* [team has broad spectrum of group process and task skills]
- Self-assessment* [periodic examination of how well the team is functioning]¹⁰

* High-Performance Teams

High-performance teams have the same characteristics but to a higher degree. Katzenbach and Smith say that strong personal commitment to each other—commitment to the others' growth and success—distinguishes high-performance teams from effective teams.

Energized by this extra sense of commitment, high-performance teams typically reflect strong extensions of the basic characteristics of teams: deeper sense of purpose, more ambitious performance goals, more complete approaches, fuller mutual accountability, interchangeable as well as complementary skills.¹¹

Team interventions in OD tend to be congruent with the characteristics identified in the preceding lists and are designed to bring about these conditions. Parenthetically, when groups are asked to describe what their groups would be like if they were operating at a highly effective level, they generate lists similar to the preceding lists.

Again, teams and work groups are considered to be the fundamental units of organizations as well as key leverage points for improving the functioning of the organization. The following are among the interventions that have been developed to help teams become more effective while simultaneously addressing organizational problems and challenges.