

THE FORMAL GROUP TEAM-BUILDING MEETING

The formal group team-building meeting has the goal of improving the team's effectiveness through better management of task demands, relationship demands, and group processes. It is an inward look by the team at its own performance, behavior, and culture for the purposes of eliminating dysfunctional behaviors and strengthening functional ones. The group critiques its performance, analyzes its way of doing things, and attempts to develop strategies to improve its operation. Sometimes the purpose of the meeting is a special agenda item, such as developing the group's performance goals for the coming year. Often the purpose of the meeting is for the more general charge expressed in the questions: How can we build ourselves into a better functioning team? and How can we do the job better?

The team-building session is usually initiated by the manager in consultation with the third party. The idea is then tested for reactions within the group. (Conversely, the group may initiate the idea and take it to the boss if they sense pressing problems that need examination and solution.) A good length of time for the meeting is anywhere from one to three days. The session should be held away from the work place.

The usual practice for these sessions is to have the consultant interview each of the group members and the leader prior to the meeting, asking them what the strengths of the group are, what their problems are, how they think the group functions, and what obstacles are in the way of the group performing better. These interview data are categorized into themes by the consultant, who presents the themes to the group at the beginning of the meeting. The group examines and discusses the issues, ranks them in order of their importance, examines the underlying dynamics of the problems, begins to work on solutions to the problems, and establishes some action steps to bring about the changes deemed desirable. It is imperative to have follow-up meetings to determine whether the action steps that were outlined were taken and to determine whether those steps had the desired effects. This flow of events constitutes the team-building meeting. But let us look closer at the components.

The meeting may be called for a special purpose, such as a new member coming into the group, an organization structure change, or planning for the next year; or it may primarily be devoted to maintaining and managing the group's culture and processes. If it is a special-purpose meeting, time should still be allocated to an examination and critique of the group's dynamics.

As mentioned previously, it is often desirable for the consultant to interview the entire group, using an open-ended approach, such as "What things do you see getting in the way of this group being a better one?" This procedure introduces the consultant to the group members and allows the consultant to assess commitment to the team-building session. The consultant decides in advance and informs the interviewees whether the information each gives will be considered public or confidential. Each approach has advantages and disadvantages. For example, if the information in the interviews is confidential, the interviewees may be more candid and open than if the information is to be public. On the other hand, treating the information as public data helps to set a climate of openness, trust, and constructive problem solving. If the information is considered confidential, the consultant is careful to report the findings in a general way that does not reveal the sources of information. Other ways the agenda

items for the meeting are developed are through such devices as the formal group agnostic meeting or through a survey.

The consultant presents the interview results in terms of themes. When everyone understands the themes, these themes are ranked by the group in terms of their importance; the most important ones form the agenda for the meeting. In the course of the meeting, much interpersonal and group process information will be generated, which may also be examined. The group thus works on two sets of items: the agenda items and the items that emerge from the interactions of the participants.

As important problems are discussed, alternatives for action are developed. Generally, the team-building meeting involves deciding on action steps for remedying problems and setting target dates for "who will do what when."

Significant variations of the team-building session entail devoting time to problem-solving methods, planning and goal-setting methods, conflict resolution techniques, and the like. These special activities are usually initiated in response to the needs demonstrated or stated by the group. The consultant often makes conceptual inputs (mini-lectures) or structures the situation so that a particular problem or process becomes the focus. A wide variety of exercises may be interspersed into the three-day meeting, depending upon the problems identified and the group phenomena that emerge.

Purposes of Team Building

Figure 9-1 suggests that team-building sessions may be directed toward problem solving for task accomplishment, examining and improving interpersonal relationships, or managing the group's culture and processes. In fact, one of these issues may be the principal reason for holding the team-building meeting. For example, suppose that the meeting is designed as a team problem-solving session to examine the impact on the team of a new function or task being added to the group's work requirements. Even in this case a portion of the session will probably be reserved for reflecting on *how* the team is solving its problems, that is, critiquing the group's processes. In this way the team becomes more effective at both the task level and the process level.

Richard Beckhard lists, in order of importance, the four major reasons or purposes involved in having teams meet other than for the sharing of information: (1) to set goals and/or priorities . . . (2) to analyze or allocate the way work is performed . . . (3) to examine the way a group is working, its processes (such as norms, decision making, communications) . . . and (4) to examine relationships among the people doing the work.¹² He notes that often all four items will be covered in a single team-building session, but it is imperative that the *primary* goal be clear and accepted by all. It is especially important that the leader and the consultant agree on the primary goal. Often the consultant will have a priority list of items that are inverse to those just given—from relationships among people as most important, to the way the group works together as next most important, to the work itself next, and to goals and priorities as least important. Lack of agreement on the primary goal can lead to wasted energy and a generally unproductive and frustrating team-building session. We agree with Beckhard when he states that the consultant should help to implement the group leader's goals for the session, not the consultant's goals.

Bell and Rosenzweig relied heavily upon team-building workshops in an OD program in a municipal government organization and came to the following assessment: