

Building a Framework that Supports Project Teams: An Example from a University/Community Collaborative Initiative

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In the university initiative described in this article, a series of project teams were funded to work on a variety of collaborative projects. The focus of this piece is on the framework that was developed and executed to select, support, and evaluate these teams. The framework is explained and described using data gathered throughout the study and discussed using Kolb's components of organizational support for teams.

Key words: Collaboration, Teams, Organizational Support

The increasing role of teams as arenas for collaboration within organizations has been well documented. In 1994, Osterman found that over 50 percent of the 700 organizational units in his study used teams; in half of these, the majority of employees worked on team projects. Additional evidence of the proliferation of teams is offered by Lawler, Mohrman, and Ledford (1995) who found that 60 percent of the 313 organizations they studied intended to increase or greatly increase their use of teams over the next decade and by Cohen and Bailey (1997) whose research indicated that organizations with more than 100 employees used teams over 80 percent of the time. In 2000, Hirokawa, DeGooyer, and Valde stated, "Groups appear to be a functional necessity in contemporary American society. From work teams to church committees, whatever we do seems to involve group work" (p. 573).

Of course, teamwork is not a panacea. Not all groups succeed, and failures in this area contribute to a high level of individual frustration, low morale, and an abundance of jokes about the ineffectiveness of meetings and teams. Some organizational consultants and researchers attribute at least some of the frustration of teamwork to a misunderstanding of the term empowerment and organizations' lack of structures and systems that support collaborative efforts. Peters (1992) says, "Empower until you're blue in the face. Call in the best consultants and create the best strategies. It makes no differences until the arteries are unclogged (the 'structure' part), then radically rewired (the 'systems' part)" (p. 13). Kolb (1996) contends that in an organization's "desire not to have too much structure, too little is often the norm. Managers hesitate to initiate structure and yet structure may, in fact, ultimately facilitate empowerment" (p. 454). Schnake, Dumler, and Cochran (1993) reported that, contrary to expectations, initiation of structure and consideration behaviors by managers may, over time, contribute to employee autonomy and responsibility since initiation of structure allows employees to perform their tasks more effectively. The relevance for teams is clear. What components in an organizational support system will allow teams to perform their tasks more effectively?

What Teams Need

Numerous scholars have addressed the properties of effective collaborative groups or teams (Hackman, 1990; Hirokawa & Keyton, 1995; Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Katzenbach & Smith, 1993; Kolb, 1996; LaFasto & Larson, 2001; Larson & LaFasto, 1989). In a three-year study conducted with a wide variety of teams, Larson and LaFasto (1989) identified the following eight characteristics of effective teams: clear, elevating goal; results-driven structure; competent team members; unified commitment; collaborative climate; standards of excellence; external support and recognition; and principled leadership. In a later work, these same researchers (LaFasto & Larson, 2001) discovered that one of five key dynamics present in successful teams is an organizational environment that promotes collaboration and teamwork. The other four key dynamics are: collaborative team members, positive team relationships, productive group problem-solving, and leadership that encourages collective achievement. Leadership may be internal, external, or both. In looking specifically at the problem-solving dynamic, they found that teams that were able to solve problems creatively and effectively were those in which team members were focused in their efforts, operated within a positive climate, and practiced open communication. In research reported the same year, Jehn and Mannix (2002) reinforced the value of communication and the importance of open discussion. Kolb (1996) likewise identified appropriate communication systems as well as clear project goals and defined individual member roles, responsibilities, and accountability as team characteristics necessary for effective functioning.

In addition to having internal systems that facilitate teamwork, teams also need a supportive organizational framework (Hackman, 1990). In his study with 27 organizational teams, Hackman found that team members had significant responsibility for managing their own work, but that decisions about such things as strategic goals, team composition, and organizational support were made by others. Kolb's (1993) research with engineering teams supports his observation. Members expected autonomy in deciding how to go about reaching their goals but they expected, and wanted, strategic direction and support from management. Kolb (1996) subsequently identified four essential components of a supportive organizational framework for teamwork. The first of these was clear direction and accountability. The other three components were appropriate staffing and training, adequate information and resources, and rewards for team effort.

Staffing or team composition has been addressed by a variety of scholars (Horwitz, 2005; Klimoski & Jones, 1995; Larson & LaFasto, 1989). All agree that members of the team should each have a purpose, that the mix of people is important, and that individuals do not intuitively know how to work together. Thus, training in teamwork has become the giant industry that it is. Team training may be broken down into two primary components; generic and specific (Cannon-Bowers, Tannenbaum, Salas, & Volpe, 1995). Team-generic training includes such components as the nature of teamwork, what helps and hinders teamwork in general, how to communicate effectively, the importance of goal setting, conflict management, how to facilitate meetings, and how to measure and monitor performance. Team-specific training, on the other hand, involves the knowledge and competencies that are specific to the team and members involved. For example, discussion in team-general training might cover the importance of each member defining his or her specific role whereas discussion in team-specific training would focus on the roles and duties of each member on that specific team. For reports of specific team training, interventions, and research see Gibson, Zellmer-Bruhn, and Schwab (2003); Glaser (1994), Spreitzer, Cohen, and Ledford (1999), and Weldon (2000). Jackson and Madsen (2004) provide an overview of common factors of high performance teams.

A popular intervention with teams is to have team members complete an assessment instrument or survey of team effectiveness. Commonly, at least some of the problems teams encounter stem from the organizational environment, rather than from the internal working of the team itself. If that is the case, organizational remedies need to be considered. Lack of adequate information and resources is often cited as a problem for organizational teams (Kolb, 1996). Hirokawa and Keyton (1995) also emphasize the importance of information resources. Their research found that information resources, along with compatible work schedules, interested/motivated members, and good group leadership were key factors that distinguished between effective and ineffective groups. Teams need adequate information, information that relates to what they are expected to do, and sufficient resources to complete their tasks. Barge (1994) talks about the organic organization that is characterized by "densely interwoven and decentralized networks" (p. 75). Although these networks may work better in theory than they do in practice (Kolb, 1996), what is relevant for this discussion is that teams may suffer from an information deficiency (Gouran, 1986), a situation in which they do not have the information they need to make informed decisions. Without adequate information and other resources, teams cannot function effectively.

For our purposes in this paper, we use the three components of clear direction and accountability, appropriate staffing and training, and adequate information and other resources (Kolb, 1996) to frame our discussion. We do not address specifically address the fourth criteria, rewards, although we recognize its importance and acknowledge that, in the case of the initiative described here, being able to award funding, in the form of mini-grants to each of our teams, negated the need for other rewards. Even though most of the teams did not receive the amount of funding they requested, they did receive something. We realize the effect that this most likely had on the motivation of the teams we describe. For a history of the need for and the lack of rewards for team efforts, see Zigon (1994), Nahavandi & Aranda (1994), and Kerr (1995).

Purpose Statement

Like many organizations, academic communities have a need to build both internal and external collaborative alliances. In this article, we use case study methodology to examine one university's approach to developing collaborative alliances between members of the university community and stakeholders in the wider environment. The specific focus of this article is the framework that was developed and executed to select, support, and evaluate these alliances or teams. The purpose of this paper is thus:

- To describe the team selection and assessment criteria that provided the overall framework for the teams
- To explain the training and resources that supported the teams

- To discuss the framework, offer suggestions based on our experiences, and reflect on lessons learned

Both authors were involved in this project from its inception both as members of the steering committee who selected the teams to be funded and as trainers/facilitators who worked with the individual teams throughout the project. The second author also was in charge of the overall university effort.

Selection and Assessment Criteria

Accountability for each team's success, or specifically how the team's success was to be measured, was built in at the front end as part of the proposal submitted by each team. The specific components that were listed as part of the proposal also served to provide direction to the teams.

The mini-grant competition was advertised within the University and also in the wider community and resulted in more proposals than could be funded. However, by keeping the funds distributed to each initiative small, more in the nature of seed money than a complete coverage of all costs, we were able to fund a total of 29 collaborative projects over a three-year period. Funding per project ranged from \$2,000 - \$8,000 per year. In exchange, participants agreed to participate in initiative activities, attend training, and submit a report at the end of the project.

Selection Criteria

The steering committee for this initiative met and, through a series of discussions and revisions, developed the criteria for evaluating the mini-grant proposals submitted by project groups and selecting the ones that would be funded. Some additional people were added to the group for the purpose of evaluating the proposals. At least two people ranked each proposal using the following criteria that are listed in priority order:

- High Impact— How many students, faculty, staff, and community members will be served by the expected results? What is the importance of the initiative to the campus and community? Is there a clear educational benefit?
- Collaborative Impact – Does the applicant's team represent a diverse group of people from the campus and the community? Is the team expected to further collaborative goals?
- Feasibility – Is the applicant likely to be able to accomplish the objectives of the project? Are the resources adequate? Is the proposed strategy likely to succeed?
- Assessment – Are the objectives clearly written and defined? Are appropriate methods of evaluation proposed?
- Leverage – Does the project build on existing, successful projects or ongoing activities? Is there a potential to leverage funding from external sources? Will the project extend or create resources in ways consistent with campus or community missions?

Each of the five areas was rated with a Likert-type scale of 1 – 5 (does not meet—fully meets) the criteria. Directions on the rating form stated that 'to be considered for funding, the proposals should be rated 4 or 5 on the first three criteria.' Ratees checked one of 4 categories for the final decision: accept and fund full amount requested, accept and fund partial amount (specify amount to be funded), conditional accept, and reject. Since the goal was to give at least some money to all projects that met the criteria, the majority of funded projects were funded for less than the requested amount. Although there was an initial concern that some project teams might not want to proceed with less than full funding, this did not turn out to be the case. All funded teams elected to proceed.

Accountability-Assessment

The criteria we used to assess the success of the overall project included: 1) demonstrated involvement of diverse stakeholders and members of the external community; 2) successful use of the mini-grants to leverage or supplement other funding sources; 3) completion and quality of the promised deliverables from each of the funded projects; 4) evaluation of participant responses to the collaborative training; and 5) evaluation using an internal questionnaire on collaboration, interviews of members of funded projects by an external person, and the projects' self-assessments of their success. Criterion five involved an extensive evaluation process that is too lengthy to be covered here. The first criterion was assessed by examining the member composition of each of the funded projects. Criteria 2 and 3 were covered in the final reports submitted by each team (examples follow), and Criterion 4, participant evaluation of the effectiveness of the training sessions, is covered in a later section of this paper.

The criteria used to evaluate the success of each project team were provided by that team in a final report that described their project, the use of funds, and the result of their efforts. As part of the assessment criteria in the initial proposals, teams were required to provide an appropriate evaluation plan to assess to extent to which objectives were met. In some cases, project teams were given a conditional accept and given feedback that their assessment plan needed to be revised and resubmitted before funding would be considered. Some examples of project evaluation criteria and assessment follow.

Example 1—project description: university students enrolled in a service-learning course live for a time in the inner city with the purpose of gaining awareness of community needs and becoming engaged in projects to address these needs. The evaluation plan focused on four criteria: 1) changes in the students' engagement and

outlook—measured by before and after written statements from the students, interviews with each student over the course of the program, and feedback received from the resident manager who lived with the students; 2) impact of the service-learning course—measured by the research designed by the students and the scheduled (future) completion dates of this research; 3) changes in the community—measured by specific activities undertaken by the students and the results of these activities; and 4) on-going impact—measured by future projects stemming from this initial effort.

Example 2—project description: expansion of a nursing center network. The evaluation of this project again focused on four criteria: 1) expansion of collaborative linkages—measured by meetings held and information disseminated; 2) design of a data management process—measured by steps taken in this effort and the scheduled completion date; 3) submission for additional funding—measured by grants written and funded; 4) development of a community wellness project—measured by scheduled classes and anticipated participation rates.

Continuing Support/Training

As part of the agreement when each proposal was funded, team members agreed to participate in a training session that would be held close to the start date of their project and in other initiative activities and to complete a report at the end of their projects.

Training Workshops

Members of 29 different teams participated in collaborative leadership training over a three-year period. On average, 4 members per team attended the six workshops with the number of participants per workshop averaging 15. Participants from each collaborative project were encouraged to attend the workshop as a team because the goal of the overall training effort was to transform a committee into a collaborative working group. The training workshops were designed as 3.5 hour sessions to enable participants to travel to and from the training in one day. Our focus during session was on developing awareness and building collaborative skills. Participants were also given materials for additional on-site team building and reflection. Included in these materials was a team inventory that could be used as a discussion tool to highlight strengths and pinpoint areas that might create difficulties for team process. Evaluations collected from participants at the close of each workshop were favorable with scores averaging 9.2 on a 10-point Likert-type scale. Short-answer responses also were quite positive.

Other Initiative Activities

Yearly meetings were held for the purpose of allowing project team members to share experiences, discuss common solutions to the challenges that arose during the projects, and, in general, learn more about teamwork and collaborative leadership. Factors identified during the training workshops as obstacles to collaborative leadership were summarized and used to generate the initial discussions. Subsequent activities involved further analysis of the factors and a generation of potential solutions. These sessions were quite popular with participants and also allowed the steering committee to reflect on what we did well or needed to change with subsequent teams.

Discussion and Application

In this section, we use Kolb's (1996) components of organizational support for teams—clear direction and accountability, appropriate staffing and training, and adequate information and resources—to frame the discussion of lessons learned. For each category, we begin by listing suggestions based on what we did that worked well and end by examining lessons learned.

Clear Direction and Accountability

Suggestions

Involve knowledgeable and motivated people in the planning and execution of the project. For our project, three professors, each with separate but compatible areas of expertise related to teamwork, and two administrators were members of the steering committee. Two of these members developed the training; these two plus one other member delivered the training. A graduate student also assisted with development and delivery. The participation of the administrators was crucial to this effort both in terms of having management buy-in and in terms of resources, which will be discussed later. Four remained active throughout the project; one administrator left the University before the initiative ended. Crucial to the success of this project was the fact that each member, including the administrators, had both scholarly and practitioner interest in the content area and goals of the initiative. This interest was a crucial motivating factor throughout the life cycle of this project. As mentioned earlier in this paper (Horowitz, 2005; Klimoski & Jones, 1995), team membership is a crucial component of effective project team functioning.

Invest time in planning. The steering committee met at least monthly and at times more often than that throughout the project to discuss issues, make any necessary changes to procedures, and plan related initiative activities. Without the willingness to spend this time and make changes, the outcome might have been less successful.

Set criteria that reflect the goals of the overall initiative and be consistent in the use of the criteria throughout the project. Quite a bit of time was spent on developing the initial set of criteria. This time proved well spent as these criteria provided both a philosophical and a structural framework that facilitated subsequent decision making.

Require teams to formulate project assessment strategies that align with team goals. In this project, each team used the criteria developed by the steering committee as a framework to help them formulate their own project objectives and the assessment plan by which the attainment of these objectives would be measured. Our efforts support research cited earlier (Hackman, 1990; Larson & LaFasto, 1989), on the importance of clear and consistent goals.

Lessons Learned

Team members need to agree on project goals and priorities. The more a goal is open to interpretation, such as to help students learn to appreciate the diversity of others, the greater the necessity for team members to discuss specific desired project outcomes. This extends beyond mere agreement on the wording in a proposal. Without this agreement, minor disagreements may turn into obstacles that hinder completion of the project. As Larson and LaFasto (1989) noted, unified commitment is a characteristic of effective teams.

Appropriate Staffing and Training

Suggestions

Require team membership that furthers the goal of the overall initiative. In our case, collaboration between university and community groups was a cornerstone of our initiative. Thus, we did not fund any teams that did not include members from these two groups. The comments made about the composition of the steering committee in the first section of the discussion also apply here. Appropriate staffing of teams is crucial.

Conduct training as close as possible to the beginning of the project and have people involved in the planning of the overall initiative conduct the training. We found throughout the three years that those participants who attended training early in the life cycle of their teams seemed to get the most from the information and discussion. It also was a chance for us, as steering committee members, to identify teams that might need additional information or intervention.

Design training that allows for both team-generic and team-specific material. These terms were defined earlier (Cannon-Bowers et al., 1995). Even though the composition of our training sessions changed slightly over years 2 and 3, with more intact teams attending after the first year, the basic design of the training still worked and worked well, judging by both the opinions of the designers/facilitators, the feedback from the participants, and the overall success of the projects. Since we did not have a control group, we admit that we have no way of knowing what the success rate might have been if training had not been offered. Training feedback responses over that last two years indicated that members appreciated having time during the training to work on their own individual issues and concerns and that the team-generic material we presented was a good introduction into these discussions.

Lessons Learned

Less is more. Yes, the material brought in by the trainers is important and should be covered. We did this. But, we noticed over the three years that our time line loosened a bit and people were allowed to eat and chat over lunch rather than eat and work, which was our structure during the first year. Of course, the fact that the composition of the training groups changed over the years and people wanted to spend time with their team members was a factor in this change. However, we also learned that trying to meet the agendas of several people—our steering committee members all had opinions of what should be in the training—caused us to include slightly more content than was feasible, desirable, or necessary. To remedy this required only a slight adjustment as we moved through subsequent training.

Team members may do all their work at a distance. We knew that the teams that were geographically dispersed would not see each other. But we rather naively expected that people who were geographically together would meet at least occasionally. For some team members, however, the only times they saw each other was during our training sessions and initiative activities. Feedback we received did emphasize how much team members appreciated these opportunities to meet, even though travel time was an issue for some teams. Overall, we were pleased with our decision to hold in-person training. We did have a web site and posted quite a bit of material there and, as mentioned earlier, had handouts and take-aways. However, given the nature of these teams, attention needs to be given as to how best to use technology to meet the needs of today's teams. Some of our most effective teams did all their work at a distance.

Adequate Information and Resources

Suggestions

People in charge should share information. Although we always planned to share some initiative information during the training sessions, we found early on that participants wanted to hear from those on the steering committee. Specifically, during years 2 and 3 when the administrator whose name was on all the project materials was involved in the training, this desire increased substantially. People wanted to hear from the person in charge. This is another reason that the time line loosened a bit—failure to accommodate this need would have resulted in a room full of frustrated people. Someone on the planning team needs to have substantial resources and knowledge of how to get this done within the university. Two of the five people on our steering committee fit this definition. Specifically, the person in charge of this initiative had significant staff support, something that few professors have. In our opinion, a committee populated only by professors, however knowledgeable, motivated, and well meaning would face substantial challenges in running a project such as ours. As mentioned, people want information. In our case, participants could call or e-mail an office and receive a quick response. The training, once designed, was coordinated through this office, requiring a less substantial investment of time by the trainers. Questions about final reports, and, of course, money, were handled by this office. As Hirokawa and Keyton (1995) found, information and other resources matter.

Lessons Learned

Resources do not need to be substantial to be effective. In our case, several of the projects received only a fraction of the money they requested. We expected teams to decline participation when notified of the amount of their funding. However, not one team did this. As acknowledged earlier, we know that being able to give funds, however, small contributed to the motivation of our teams. But, people were willing to commit themselves to a considerable amount of additional work—developing a detailed proposal that included an assessment plan, attending training and other activities, completing a project-end report—for a relatively small amount of money. It is true that once a group receives any money or recognition, subsequent funding sources are more willing to invest in them. Thus, for groups that are not able to offer funding beyond a basis project support structure, awarding certificates of accomplishment or other similar types of rewards might be sufficient incentive for teams starting out on projects that eventually will need to attract a funding source. If a small amount of money is available, we suggest spreading it among as many projects as feasible.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The initiative we describe in this paper owes a significant portion of its success to the framework that was developed and executed to select, support, and evaluate the project teams. Specifically the selection and assessment criteria provided philosophical and structural guidelines to the steering committee, the teams, and the project evaluators; the training and annual project meetings provided opportunities for acquisition of knowledge, skill building, and collaboration. The design of the project allowed for a continuous learning and feedback cycle that encouraged reflective thinking and improvement in procedures and outcomes. Our conclusions are thus: 1) Upfront planning is crucial for a project of this magnitude. Time spent in developing a framework and policies and procedures that flow from that framework gives a substantial return on investment; 2) The framework should allow for flexibility and continuous learning. Build in ways in which participants can learn from each other; 3) Consistency throughout the project in terms of what is expected of and from the teams and in the support offered to the teams will facilitate successful completion of projects.

Suggestions for future research include further testing of Kolb's components of organizational support: clear direction and accountability, appropriate staffing and training, adequate information and other resources, and rewards for teamwork. Although only the first three were included in our discussion in this paper, rewards for teamwork were incorporated in the funding that the teams received. This funding depended in part on each team making a case that the team would represent a diverse group of people who would work collaboratively on team goals. An interesting future project might explore the types of non-monetary rewards that could encourage similar collaborative work. Additionally, data collected on each of the components would provide information useful to both scholars and practitioners.

Too often organizational support systems are overlooked in a organization's zeal to deliver teamwork skills to employees who will be, or currently are, working on teams. However, such training has a limited chance of a successful outcome if these teams are not supported in a very tangible way throughout the life cycle of the project. Organizational support systems foster functional empowerment. Future research on the aspects of organizational support that are most useful and the effects of this support on team performance and outcomes would benefit scholars, practitioners, and the many people who work on organizational teams.

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