The Manager’s Changing Role in a Teams Environment

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What is the impact of empowered teams on the role of managers? This viewpoint explores the “advisor” or “advocate” role for managers who are considering the deployment of a teams environment in their organizations, and suggests why this new role should be viewed as beneficial to the manager as well as the empowered staff.

The practice of creating “empowered teams” in the workplace is rapidly gaining momentum in this country, and is creating a management revolution. The wholesale downsizing of the private and public sectors over the past several years has served as a sort of shock therapy to the work force. Job security is a thing of the past. Employee loyalty has been shattered. Workloads are up dramatically, as we all have to do more with less. Opportunities for advancement are limited. Our organizations have been forced to re-examine their basic goals and operating principles in order to compete in a global economy while keeping the work force effective and productive.

Much has been written about this state, and several movements have emerged to help address these challenges, including the quality movement spawned by Dr. W. Edwards Deming and its Total Quality Service off-shoot, the stewardship movement promoted by Peter Block, the entrepreneurial management movement based on the writings of Osborne and Gaebler, and the reengineering movement of Hammer and Champy. One of the common threads that runs through all these management concepts is the need to get the most out of the work force by establishing empowered teams. Many managers believe that this approach merely represents the latest management fad that will pass, as have all the others, leaving the status quo. We believe this viewpoint to be short-sighted at best and self-serving at worst.

Much has also been written about the teams approach, most of it focusing on potential gains in effectiveness, the quality improvements that are possible, the reduced overhead and competitive advantages that can result, and the quality-of-life gains for the work force. But what about the impact of empowered teams on managers?

The literature generally focuses on managers as expendable, no longer needed in the new empowered-team work force. In fact, management is routinely identified as the largest single obstacle to achieving the benefits promised by a teams environment. We suspect there are two reasons for this. First, an effective teams environment does reduce the need for managers in the classic sense. (It’s worth noting that the managerial ranks have already been thinned steadily as a result of downsizing over the last ten to fifteen years.) Second, there has been too little focus on the role the manager should play in the new environment. The tendency to resist change coupled with the failure to articulate effectively the new managerial role make it understandable that managers might resist the teams movement.

The typical description of a teams environment is one in which the manager stops making decisions, stops giving orders, and becomes more of a coach. Unfortunately, this coaching concept may not be very well defined in practical terms. In addition, there is no clear reason given for why a manager might see this change as beneficial to his or her career. What will managers actually be doing in the new environment, and how can that job prove to be a desirable, enriching experience?

Teams environment

There are three kinds of teams typically discussed in the literature: (1) quality circles—groups of employees who focus specifically on quality problems in delivery of the products or services the organization produces; (2) Total Quality Service (TQS) teams—groups of employees who focus on business activities as a set of processes that can be incrementally improved; and (3) self-directed/self-managed teams—groups of employees who manage themselves collectively and assume responsibility for many of the traditional managerial functions, such as performance appraisals, disciplinary actions, and budgets.

The three types of teams share common conceptual underpinnings and build upon one another. Quality circles were the first to gain popularity in the early 1980s, but are more or less considered passé today. Quality circles recognize that the people who do the work are the ones who know best how to fix problems. TQS teams build on and extend the quality circle concept to recognize that a problem may be the result of more systemic issues, requiring a look at the entire business process to address the fundamental problem. Self-directed teams go one step further to recognize that the processes themselves are affected by the organizational structures we build and the mindsets of the people within them. Manz and Sims consider the latter two (TQS and self-directed teams) a particularly powerful combination.

Each type of team involves some degree of change in the traditional perception of the manager as the person who has the most expertise and who rightfully should make all the decisions. In quality circles and TQS teams, the existing organizational structure is usually retained, leaving the existing power structure in place. Thus these two team types are fundamentally evolutionary in nature. However, self-directed teams challenge the basic power structure: the right of the manager to make decisions and to be in control. This makes them fundamentally revolutionary in nature.

We will focus on the new role of the manager within a self-directed teams environment, as we believe that is where the teams movement is going.

Teams management model

The teams approach is about treating people like adults, recognizing that work is a voluntary activity (voluntary in that we are all free to quit and work elsewhere), and that everyone wants to enjoy and take pride in her or his work. Dr. Deming makes this point a hallmark of his philosophy: work has intrinsic value and people want to do a good job.

We need to ensure that organizational processes support workers’ ability to do a good job and ensure employees’ ability to affect the outcomes of their efforts. If the processes do not allow workers to do a good job, or if workers are unable to affect the outcomes, they become disillusioned and disengaged.

In treating people like adults, the teams approach recognizes that each person has a critical role to play in the delivery of the organization’s products and services. It also recognizes that each person—once he or she is trained—is in the best position to understand the details of any process and serves as the best source for identifying ways to improve each process. The teams approach recognizes that a synergy occurs when everyone is working together towards a shared goal and everyone understands the issues and challenges involved in meeting that goal.

The manager psyche

Too often managers have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Many have grown up in the traditional hierarchical system and, indeed, have prospered by it. The unpleasant truth is that managers tend to like to control others and enjoy the notoriety of being the decision-maker and the special status of being a manager. Thus managers are often not thrilled at the prospect of giving up control and sharing decision-making and the limelight with others.

The teams concept challenges managers’ views of themselves and their roles in the organization. It can be a serious blow to managerial egos to recognize that teams can do the job, and often do it better than they can. An early team training session—where a new team was being introduced to a pair of tools, brainstorming and multi-voting—serves as a case in point. One of the participants was knowledgeable about the topic being discussed and contributed a number of ideas in the round-robin technique being used. There were many other contributions, however, and when it came time to vote for the best alternatives, he did not vote for a single one of his own ideas! He was forced to admit his ideas had simply not been as good as those generated by the rest of the team. This provided a powerful lesson in the power and value of a teams environment.

The manager’s new role

Is there anything positive the environment has to offer managers from the old hierarchical structure? We believe the answer is yes, but the role and environment are significantly different from the ones they have been used to. Too often managers have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Many have grown up in the traditional hierarchical structure. We believe the answer is yes, but the role and environment are significantly different from the ones they have been used to. A good way to underscore this is to abandon the title of “manager” and adopt something different, such as “team advisor,” as suggested by Manz and Sims, or perhaps “case manager,” as suggested by Hammer and Champy. “Advocate” is another possibility.

Many of the traditional managerial roles are not needed in the new teams environment. Those managers who define their role in the organization solely on the basis of control may not make the transition to the new order. However, managers who define themselves on the basis of leadership, advocacy, facilitation, coordination, the removal of barriers, and the development of staff should make the transition to teams smoothly since they already possess the appropriate
mindset for a teams environment.

Leadership means providing direction for the organization—establishing a vision. People don’t want to be managed; they want to be led. We assert that this has always been the most important role of management. Teams have shown they can manage themselves on a day-to-day basis, thus freeing management’s time to concentrate on moving the organization to where it needs to go. Whether we like it or not, change is a given in today’s organizations. Nothing will kill an enterprise faster than stagnation. Most of us can relate to the metaphor that life in the 90s is permanent “white water.” Forget the idea of shooting the rapids and coming to an area of calm where we can collect our senses before attempting the next stretch of rough water; we’re in an environment of constant change. Leadership has never been more important than it is today, and teams can release managers from the imperatives of daily crises to focus on determining where the winds of change will take the organization and how it can profit from those changes.

Advocacy and removal of barriers means battling the bureaucracy, forming partnerships, and overcoming negativity to advance team goals. A leader in an organization needs to “clear the way” for progressive ideas to be implemented. As Hammer and Champy point out, many barriers are erected against new ideas in any organization. A worker comes up with a new idea that he feels has merit and takes it to his boss. If she likes it, she takes it to her boss, and so on. Anyone along the chain of command has veto power; any single “no” can kill it. Conversely, look at all the “yeses” that must be garnered in order for the idea to go forward. Is it any wonder our organizations stifle creativity? There is a role for advocacy and removal of barriers that the team advisor can play. This role requires someone who is articulate, who is skilled in consensus-building, who can help explain and sell an idea, who can line up the necessary resources, and who can keep the idea from getting stalled in the bureaucracy.

Facilitation and coordination means helping the team find solutions to problems and coordinating activities between teams. There is a role for facilitation and coordination that is crucial to the group process. The team advisor can be tapped to assist the team as necessary, not by giving them the answers but by helping them find the answers on their own, and to coordinate activities with others in the organization to ensure a smoothly operating enterprise.

Development of staff means helping staff members continue to progress in their careers. There are many development opportunities in the teams environment. Team members may be called on to perform functions and roles they have had little or no experience with or expertise in: budgeting, conflict resolution, providing feedback, and dealing with different communication styles and differing levels of interpersonal skills. Ongoing training is needed to help develop members of the team. They also need access to someone who can serve a mentor role and help them develop needed expertise. Team members can usually provide technical skills, but they will need help from outside the team to develop these additional non-technical skills.

The above characteristics of the new “team advisor” position were also key in the traditional managerial role, but were often compromised to deal with the crisis du jour. In the teams environment, the team advisor can focus on these aspects and thereby improve the overall effectiveness of leadership in the operation of the organization. Management focus is on the “what,” while the team focus is on the “how.” Thus occurs the following seeming paradox: by giving up control (of individuals), management gains control (of the organization).

Conclusion

Managers in the traditional hierarchical structures have little to fear, per se, from the introduction of teams. Change is coming to our organizations. It is being driven by the expediences of downsized organizations and increased competition. The old hierarchical command and control organizational structures are no longer effective in today’s global market and enterprises.

The work force is demanding and receiving a say in how their organizations are run. According to this is not altruism on the part of management, but rather a recognition that there is a better way of doing business. By giving up control of individuals, managers gain better control of the organization. This is truly a win-win situation, as everyone comes out ahead. Those managers who are solely control-oriented may not survive the transition—but their days were already numbered. Teams will only hasten the process, as we transform our organizations into more enlightened institutions that treat people as adults who have productive and innovative contributions to make.

For further reading:


8 Ibid., p. 99.


10 Hammer and Champy, p. 28.