Departmental dysfunction essay

A dysfunctional department will ensure department-wide failings in the technology employed and vice versa. To be clear, functional departments can be loosely defined as work groups in which efficiency and clear goals combine to create a functional environment for employees and other departments that depend upon them. In contrast, dysfunctional departments lack efficiency and clearly defined goals and purposes, so that dysfunction reigns and employees and those that must deal with them are hindered.

Technological departments are more complex matrices than others, as the functionality of employees are dependent on the various components of information systems while the department is only functional as a whole when the employees and the technology are both in sync. Causality is important as faulty technology or ignorance of how technology is to be implemented can negatively effect both employees individually and the department as a whole.

Similarly if a department as a whole or employees individuals are given a negative reputation by other departments or those in charge of oversight, dysfunction can occur on a more psychological basis as a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. Therefore, it is essential that a functional environment is created by functional technology and the domino effect will not be an issue in terms of breakdown on the lowest level to dysfunction on the highest, departmental level. Earliest Research on Technological Efficiency

Frederick Taylor and Henry Ford are considered the founding fathers, in lieu of a better term, of the efficiency needed for technology in the beginning of the industrial revolution. Their work is still analyzed to this day and although

technology has advanced, the methods of efficiency are still relevant. This is evidence that the field of technological functionality and efficiency is a field still in it's infancy and that new technology seems to be emerging faster than the research that helps technologists to better function.

Though looking at the earliest works on efficiency is a good place to begin to build a working model of how to avoid dysfunction. In The Principles of Scientific Management, Taylor makes the statement that " the workman is not allowed to use any implements and methods he sees fit in the daily practise of his work. Every encouragement, however, should be given to him to suggest improvements". Therefore communication is essential to employees and their superiors.

If a system of feedback is not properly put in place, an employee may very well know a better system to improve technological devices, but his or her advice is not heeded or the employee may fear ramifications for their criticism of current practices. This should be the foundation of a technology department, good feedback and good communication to avoid dysfunction. If technological dysfunction occurs at this point, there will be a sense of shared responsibility for the repair and no sense of blame on management.

Shiomi & Wada (1995) show the improvements that can be made on the earliest ideas of Henry Ford and the production method known as Fordism. In this context, Fordism is explained as a method that is concerned with ultimate output and has been redesigned to fit assembly line production of vehicles, since it's earliest inception with the first automobiles produced by Ford. However, this method is interesting to look at, as the problems with

technology and the people in charge of it can be relevant if one were to use the metaphor of a department as an assembly line.

Shiomi and Wada, therefore use a modern version of Fordism to analyze the issues within the components used to build (technology) with the processes used to assemble a product (employee function), and finally either a satisfactory outcome or an overload of capacity (dysfunction) that results in production development. Therefore, by applying this model and metaphor of a technology department as an assembly line, both the products used and the processes undertaken to perform or create what is needed for a department is contingent on both the product and the people.

Once a technological glitch is found, if employees continue to function in a quick pace on the assembly line, it will take more time to return to a retrospective fix than it would have been to get feedback on the initial errors. Therefore, although speed is important, quality should always trump quantity. Similarly the ideas that Taylor brought forth with feedback should be implemented, so that all on the assembly line, so to speak, are taught to be aware of any glitches or issues and halt production (or in this case use of the technology) until repairs or upgrades are made.

Earliest Criticism on Production and Bureaucracy Before technology had reached the point to peak the interest of Ford and Taylor, social scientists, such as Max Weber researched what is called the " iron cage" of bureaucracy and looked at the limitations of the individual within this so-called cage. The characteristics of a bureaucracy include cold and unfeeling

communication, which can be looked upon today as e-mails and faxes to co-workers rather than face-to-face communications.

Weber, also, looked at the rift between people in different hierarchal positions within an organization and the conflict between them. The importance of looking at this literature is that technology is only as strong as the people who make it and use it and a department is only as strong as the weakest link of all employees. Therefore if one person is unsatisfied in this hierarchy, dysfunction will either trickle down from the top or it will infect others in a parallel fashion.

Even with feedbacks put in place for underlings to report to higher-ups, when the issue manifests itself in dissatisfaction with co-workers of the same status, there will be no feedback in this way and blame and dysfunction may abound. It is important to note, then that an employee must not only be literate in technology, but also in their own personality and become literate, so to speak in communicating with all in their department whether it be via technological communications or face-to-face interaction. " Technoliteracy"

Bob Veres (2006) explains that a certain level of " technoliteracy" is required for an organization to not only stay informed of current research in business, but also in current trends in technology. By looking at the earliest research on technological efficiency and issues with informality, such as the works of Taylor and Weber, it is easy for employees in technological fields to see how far we have come since the industrial revolution and managers and employees alike may find themselves hitting " the wall", as Veres describes it.

Though Veres explains this as the type of comfort that may come with a high level of functioning in a department or a sense that a company has reached a goal number in their client base, so that taking on new clients is not needed, this can also be applied to any technology department that feels too comfortable with doing well. This paradox is that when employees are experiencing a boom in their departments and have developed a good grasp in their technological literacy, changing it (even for the better) is looked upon with distrust and as the old adage goes " if it's not broken don't fix it".

Therefore, departments may not think there is a need for change or if change is implemented, employees may balk at the idea and believe they are " technoliterate" experts, who need no more technological training. Personal Accountability Literacy Just as employees and managers must stay abreast of the newest technological trends, dysfunction as a correlation again must be considered. As with the previous passage, it is obvious that a sense of comfort can cause conflict with learning and using new technology, obviously levels of discomfort with the products (technology) is as important as the process (interaction with employees).

Baker and Newport (2003) make implications that co-dependent behavior is the cause of negative, dysfunctional behaviors that begin with managers and are transferred to their charges. They contest that any research done on this subject not only be with technology, but also in the fields of psychology and sociology. Helping managers who come from dysfunctional backgrounds, however, presents a new and different problem for organizations. There is no management development model for dealing with dysfunctional managers.

They cannot be " cured" through projects or seminars. Dysfunctional patterns result from early patterns, not lack of skills, knowledge, or ability (Hall, 1991). Recognizing then, that some managers and employees cannot be helped and no amount of technological training can change their psychological makeup, is essential. Just as an inefficient computer program would be discarded in favor of a more efficient one, dysfunctional department managers and other team members should be looked upon in the same manner. Technology and Cross Training

According to Nickol (2000) teams go through at least three if not four stages to become functional. The first is team awareness, the second involves learning team skills, the third involves learning technical and administrational skills, while the fourth is not mandatory and that is cross-training. It is important to note here, that Nickols puts learning team building skills ahead of learning technical skills and this is important to note, that if a department relies only on the technical skills of the employees and not the team skills, dysfunction is more likely.

Similarly, cross-training is an excellent buffer to technical dysfunction, as it allows more employees to be on the alert for issues that may arise from faulty software, hardware, and the inner workings of the team itself. Too much or too little specialization can be problematic, as Weber's criticism of the bureaucracy points to the alienation that ensues from informality and distance, Nickols offers a more modern and comprehensive solution to this in team building and cross training. It is important, though, that there is not an overabundance of employees working on the same technological issue, as this can cause conflict.

The key here is to have each employee be able to work in different areas, but to only use this knowledge to compliment the already designated person, not to compete with them or to otherwise hinder the process of working on a technical area. Surveys and Other Methods of Functionality Michael Slemmer (2008) demonstrates the effectiveness of using surveys to determine what technological issues are most prominent in his particular department, although his respondents were members of wealth management firms.

Just as cross training individuals and monitoring feedback within technological departments is important, so is implementing surveys and round-table discussions from other departments on technology issues both department-wide and company-wide. The magazine Personnel Today even provides a " rant" hotline in which people irritated with technological work issues can call confidentially to speak with someone about their difficulties. An e-mail address is also provided.

This type of anonymous support system for frustrated employees coupled with surveys and non-anonymous round tables are good ideas to help ameliorate the frustration that literature review has proven is synonymous with technology, since employees and those dealing with technology department sometimes feel lost in the matrix of information technology. Special Case Study Certain technology departments like those in the Department of Defense must, however, be more anonymous especially in technology issues that are labeled as classified.

This " for your eyes only" type of technology and work environment can pose additional issues, as the feedback loop and hierarchy of checks and balances

will be more structured and potentially harder to mediate. In addition to this, the stress of performing in " life or death" situations can be overwhelming with much oversight and even public scrutiny for failure. James O'Bryon (2007) has voiced concerned with the Department of Defense and the issues related to the lack of technical expertise with the DoD along with issues with interagency confusion.

There is, also, the interesting dynamic that is posed with contractors that must learn the technology and operate under different controls than DoD members. Again, however, a survey was put into place by O'Bryon to help alleviate the technological issues and results were examined to measure feasibility. This reiterates the former passage and the need for feedback and survey mechanisms, even in special cases, such as the Department of Defense. Technology Confusion and Conclusion

In conclusion, technology is constantly evolving as is the literature available in understanding the functions and dysfunctions of the technical along with the personal and interpersonal interactions of technology departments. Looking back to the earliest literature on these issues can help current technologists understand how far we have gone as an industrial, global society, but much work is needed to be done to catch up to current technology, which is constantly evolving and changing.

If people and departments could improve in the way that technology has, there would be no need for an analysis, such as this. The bottom line is, then, that more research needs to be done on how to improve technology when that technology is dependent on human factors and dysfunction

teams, at times. Adding to the working models and bodies of literature available is good industry practice and implementing programs and processes that have a proven track record is essential in avoiding dysfunctional and assuring the most functional technological teams possible.