

Action learning review

[Education](#), [Learning](#)



The Longwall department is responsible for the majority of coal production at the mine and hence, revenue for the business. The management group in this department consist of five staff members, with the Superintendent as the senior person reporting to the Mine Manager. As Technical Services Manager I am a member of the senior management team for the mine, and a peer to the Mine Manager. However, I have no direct authority over the Longwall department. Although it is suited to the approach, the Longwall department does not tend to operate effectively as a team.

Whilst there is a clear annual performance target set by senior management, there will often be confusion amongst the group when they attend the mine's planning meetings as to what the specific short term priorities for the department should be and the best way to achieve them. This confusion invariably leads to conflict in these meetings between group members, with individuals attempting to ensure that their specific area of responsibility is not affected by the other's individual priorities.

There has been a high turnover of staff in the past year and the overall performance of the Longwall has been poor, with production results 40% below budget impacting significantly on the profitability of the business. Analysis The Longwall mining process is complex and to be successful requires reciprocal interdependence of tasks (Thompson, 1967). The engineers must work closely with the operations staff in the department through the planning and implementation stages to ensure safe and productive operations with minimal unplanned delays.

This requirement of interdependence makes the Longwall process ideally suited to a team approach for management. Although it is a small group

comprised of five staff with complementary skills, and a common production target for the year, the Longwall department does not currently satisfy the requirements of Katzenbach and Smith's (1993) definition of a team. They fail to define short term goals and work processes which would lead to achievement of the annual production target and, in addition, the group does not hold themselves mutually accountable for their performance.

The lack of team approach towards these highly interdependent tasks leads to competing short term priorities within the group and results in poor overall performance. One of the key reasons that the Longwall department has failed to come together as a team is a lack of group cohesiveness (Shaw, 1981). The members of the group are heterogeneous (Managing People & Organisations, 2006), with different expertise and experience and as a result there is often competition and conflict (Raelin, 1985) with regards to the best approach to various tasks.

This is potentially linked to the lack of specific short term goal setting completed within the group as they seek to avoid conflict because they lack the interpersonal skill of conflict resolution (Managing People & Organisations, 2006). However, this conflict inevitably occurs when the group attends the mine's planning meetings, as the individuals promote different priorities and ideas. If the group was more cohesive and co-operative, individuals would not feel threatened by other members and the heterogeneity of the group could be harnessed in a positive way through creative and flexible solutions to problems.

For example one of the mining staff may have a different solution to an engineering problem which was not considered by the engineers. The lack of

cohesiveness has led to a high turnover of staff over the past year. This means that Tuckman and Jensen's (1977) life cycle of the group has had to return to the forming stage of the on a number of occasions and this in turn has hindered the development of group norms (norming stage) which would enhance co-operation within the group and is essential to achieve the required performance.

This lack of progress through the group life cycle is also linked to the level of competition between heterogeneous group members as they battle for power and influence in the group. The required short term goal setting and work approaches would be more easily achieved by a cohesive group. If the group was able to achieve the latter stages of the life cycle it is likely that group cohesiveness would be high and there would be significantly less staff turnover.

The management processes at the mine currently manage individuals rather than teams (Hackman, 1990). This is linked to the Longwall department's reluctance to embrace mutual accountability for performance and also the reluctance of the Superintendent to effectively lead the group as a team, as discussed below. Remuneration and bonuses are reviewed on the basis of individual performance, with little accountability for performance as part of a team. This leads individuals to "protect" themselves by making excuses and blaming others for poor performance.

It also encourages individuals to focus on the specific tasks and priorities that are linked to their individual performance rather than those best suited to the overall department's performance, resulting in conflict and a lack of co-operation in the planning and implementation of tasks. On the basis of <https://assignbuster.com/action-learning-review/>

Thompson's (2000) model, the Longwall department achieves two out of three essential conditions to be an effective team. The group has the requisite knowledge, skills and ability to complete the required tasks and their motivation to do so is evidenced by the long hours that each individual spends at work focussing on those tasks.

However, as mentioned earlier, the group lacks co-ordination strategies such as short term goal setting and work method development which prevents them from developing into a real team. In addition, Thompson's team effectiveness model also requires an appropriate environment in which the team can operate. As discussed earlier, the design of the team is appropriate however the requisite organisational context and team culture are currently absent.

As can be seen from the earlier analysis, the management of the Longwall mining process is well suited to a team approach, provided that the personnel are managed effectively as a team rather than as individuals in a group. On the basis of Katzenbach and Smith's team performance curve (1992) the Longwall department is currently at the potential team stage. The individuals in the department have a clear annual production target and are all working hard to achieve it, however, they lack specific short term goals, a common working approach and an attitude of mutual accountability.

To achieve the desired performance and meet the annual production targets, the team will need to move from the potential team stage to the real team stage. Improvement Planning From my analysis of the Longwall department I have identified three specific improvement opportunities that I would pursue if I was the Mine Manager to move the team from the potential team stage to

the real team stage. Firstly I would look to improve the group's specific competencies essential for effective teamwork through formal training and improve group cohesiveness through team building activities.

Secondly I would implement a process to facilitate the setting of short term goals and work methods to achieve them. Finally I would modify the performance management system and remuneration packages for the individuals in the department to reflect a team based approach rather than individual management. However, prior to beginning the improvement processes I would begin calling the department the Longwall team so that they begin to identify themselves as a team rather than a workgroup or department.

To improve the group's task-related and interpersonal competencies, which are important for effective teamwork, I would organise for the group to go off site together for one week of formal training and team building exercises (Managing People & Organisations, 2006). This training may need to be ongoing. It is important that the group attends this training together so that they can begin to build mutual trust and respect and develop social capital (Lengnick-Hall and Lengnick-Hall, 2004).

It is also essential that the training is held off site to ensure there are no distractions. One possible obstacle to carrying out this training is that taking the whole group offsite at the same time leaves the workforce with a lack of supervision or direction. To overcome this I would arrange the Superintendent of another area of the mine who has significant Longwall experience to cover the absence of Longwall Superintendent. I would also

arrange for the mechanical and electrical engineers from the engineering department to provide coverage from an engineering perspective.

The success of this training can be measured through an assessment process conducted by the training organisation at the end of the training program to examine the understanding and application of the concepts by the individuals in the group. A questionnaire completed by each member of the group would also be implemented to determine their perception of the applicability and success of the training. To facilitate the group's setting of short term goals and work methods to achieve them, I would send them off site again for two days with an external facilitator.

This forum would also include team building activities to break up the workshop and continue to promote team bonding. They would utilise the task-related competencies gained in the formal training process to develop and document short term goals based on achieving the annual production targets set by senior management. They would also be required to assess the potential obstacles and risks to achieving their short term goals and develop and document contingency plans to overcome those obstacles. It is essential that the team develops the goals together so that they have ownership and commitment to achieving them.

They need to ensure that the goals and work methods focus on performance not just togetherness (Katzenbach and Smith, 1992). Again, a potential obstacle to this process is taking the group offsite together leaving the workforce with a lack of supervision and direction. This would be addressed in the same manner as previously for the formal training. A second potential obstacle/risk to this process is the quality of the external facilitator. If this

person does not have the appropriate skills to keep the workshop on track and the understanding of the desired outcomes, it is likely that the workshop will not be successful.

To overcome this obstacle I would interview potential facilitators and seek references from others who have used them in the past. Once selected, I would ensure that the facilitator is very clear about the purpose of the workshop and the required documented outcomes. To measure the success of this workshop I would review the documented short term goals to ensure that they will allow the team to meet the annual production target and I would also assess the adequacy and relevance of the contingency plans to overcome the identified obstacles and risks.

A second measure will be whether or not the group achieves its self developed short term goals over the following weeks. To modify the performance management review system I would change it from an individual performance review by the Superintendent to a 360 degree review process. This review would be based on individual contribution to the team performance as viewed by other members of the team and will provide valuable feedback for individuals.

I would also change the remuneration system for the individuals in the team to incorporate a bonus related to Longwall performance as a team measured on the basis of coal produced against targets (Gross 1995). This would encourage the team culture to develop with individuals supporting each other and keeping each other on track rather than pursuing individual priorities. One obstacle to this could be the feeling that some things which

could impact Longwall production are out of the management team's control, such as geological conditions.

To overcome this I would document the potential influences on performance which are not controllable by the team and undertake to discount the production targets by a proportional amount to any performance impacts suffered to ensure that the bonus arrangement is not compromised. The measure of the success of this improvement strategy will be the achievement of production targets over the short and long term.

References

Gross, S. E. 1995, Compensation for teams: how to design and implement team-based reward programs, American Management Association, New York.

Hackman, J. R. 1990, Groups that work (and those that don't), Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

Katzenbach, J. & Smith, D. K. 1993, The wisdom of teams: creating the high performance organization, McGraw-Hill, London.

Katzenbach, J. & Smith, D. 1992, ' Why teams matter', extract from The wisdom of teams: creating the high performance organization, in The McKinsey Quarterly, no. 3 of 1992, pp. 3-27.

Lengnick-Hall, M. L. & Lengnick-Hall, C. A. 2004, ' HR's role in building relationship networks', Academy of Management Review, vol. 17, no. 4, pp. 53-63.

Managing People and Organisations, 2006, Unit 5, pp. 1-56, AGSM MBA (Executive) Program.

Raelin, J. 1985, The clash of cultures, Harvard Business School Press, Boston.

Shaw, M. E. 1981, Group dynamics: the social psychology of small group behaviour, McGraw-Hill, New York.

Thompson, J. D. 1967, Organizations in action, McGraw-Hill, New York.

Thompson, L. 2000, Making the team: a guide for managers, Prentice-Hall, Upper Saddle

River. Tuckman, B. & Jensen, M. 1977, ' Stages of small group development'
Group and organisational studies, vol. 2.