

Advantages and disadvantages of working in teams



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What are the advantages and disadvantages of working in teams? By reference to relevant theory show how can the disadvantages be reduced or avoided.

A team may be defined as ' a group of individuals who work together to produce products or deliver services for which they are mutually accountable. Team members share goals and are mutually held accountable for meeting them, they are independent in their accomplishment and they affect the results through their interactions with one another. Because the team is collectively accountable, the work of integrating with one another is included among the responsibilities of each member (Mohrman, Cohen & Mohrman, 1995).'

Organizations have grown in size and have become structurally more complex, it is important for groups of people to work together in coordinated ways to achieve objectives which contribute to overall aims of the organisation have become increasingly urgent. Working in teams has several advantages:

Teams are the best way to enact organizational strategy, because of the rapidly changing organizational environments, strategy, and structure. Team based organisations, with their flat structures; respond quickly and effectively in fast-changing environments most organisations now encounter (Cohen & Bailey, 1997).

Teams enable organisations to develop and deliver products and services quickly and cost effectively. Teams can work faster and more effectively with members working in parallel and interdependently whereas individuals working serially are much slower.

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' Teams enable organizations to learn (and retain learning) more effectively. When one team member leaves, the learning of the team is not lost. Team members also learn from each other during the course of team working.

Improved quality management are promoted by cross-functional teams. By combining team members' diverse perspectives, decision making is comprehensive because team members question ideas and decisions about how best to provide products and services to clients. Diversity, properly processed, leads to high quality decision making and innovation (West, 2002).

Cross- functional design teams can undertake radical change. The breadth of perspective offered by cross-functional teams produces the questioning and integration of diverse perspectives that enables teams to challenge basic assumptions and make radical changes to improve their products, services and ways of working.'

Time is saved if activities, formerly performed sequentially by individuals, can be performed concurrently by people working in teams.

Innovation is promoted within team-based organizations because of cross fertilization of ideas.

An analysis of combined results of 131 studies of organizational change found that interventions with the largest effects upon financial performance were team development interventions or the creation of autonomous work groups (Macy & Izumi, 1993).

Change is effective when multiple elements of change are made simultaneously in technology, human resource management systems, and organizational structure, and team working is already present or a component of the change.

Applebaum and Batt (1994) reviewed 12 large scale surveys and 185 case studies of managerial practices. They concluded that team based working led to improvements in organizational performance on measures of both efficiency and quality.

Employees who work in teams report higher levels of commitment and improvement, and also studies show that they have lower stress levels than those who do not work in teams.

Creativity and innovation are prompted within team based organizations through cross-fertilization of ideas (West, Tjosvold, &Smith, 2003).

Although team working can be effective for all the reasons listed above, there are also many barriers to effective team working which team members must learn to overcome or avoid if they are to succeed in achieving synergy- the added advantage of working in teams over and above the outputs from individuals working alone (Brown, 2000).

Loss of effort is one of the disadvantages of working as a team. In the 1890s, French agricultural engineer Max Ringelmann explored whether individuals working alone were more effective than those working in teams. He instructed agricultural students to pull on a rope attached to a dynamometer and measured the amount of pull. Working alone, the average student could

pull a weight of 85 kg. Ringelmann then arranged the students in teams of seven and instructed them to pull on the rope as hard as possible. The average pull for a team of seven was 450 kg. The teams were pulling only 75 percent as hard as the aggregated work of seven individuals pulling alone (Kravitz & Martin, 1986).

Why do these occur? They result from a phenomenon that psychologists call “social loafing” (Rutte, 2003). Individuals sometimes work less hard when their efforts are combined with those of others than when they are considered individually. Those whose work is difficult to identify and evaluate because of their roles in groups make less effort. It is a characteristic of human behaviour that people may work less hard in teams than if they alone were responsible for task outcomes, especially if the task is not intrinsically motivating or they do not feel a strong sense of team cohesion.

Steiner (1972) proposed that group effectiveness is understandable if we separate out potential productivity of groups, their actual productivity, and the gap between them. The gap, he asserted, was due to “process losses” such as coordination and communication problems. The social loafing explanation of poor group performance is helpful in understanding some of the difficulties faced by teams. However, it does not account for the fact that group decision making is sometimes inexplicably flawed.

Low creativity is also another disadvantage in working in teams. Early studies comparing the effectiveness of brainstorming individually or in groups involved creating “statisticized” and “real” groups. Statisticized groups consisted of five individuals working alone in separate rooms who

were given a five-minute period to generate ideas on uses of an object. Their results were aggregated at the end and any redundant ideas due to repetition by different individuals were taken out. Real groups of five individuals worked together for five minutes generating as many ideas as possible and withholding criticism. The statisticized groups produced an average of 68 ideas, while the real groups produced an average of only 37 ideas.

Individuals working alone produce more ideas when they are aggregated than do groups working together. Many managers immediately argue that the quality of ideas produced by groups will be better than the quality of ideas produced by individuals.

Groups fail to produce the synergistic outcomes that we expect of them in brainstorming groups. Why does this happen? The explanation appears to be that when people are speaking in brainstorming groups other individuals are not able to speak and so are less likely to put ideas forward. Moreover, they are busy holding their ideas in their memories, waiting for a chance to speak, and this interferes with their ability to produce other ideas.

Further research showed that the ability of partners in teams may affect performance also and produce process gains. When team members were told they were working with a relatively low ability partner on a brainstorming test, they often worked hard to “make up for” the weaker member. There is evidence too that the less able may raise their performance to a level close to that of the highest performing team member

when the discrepancy between their abilities is not too large (Stroebe, Diehl, & Abakoumkin, 1996).

It is therefore clear that the motivational value of the team task, the sense of identity in the team, and the national culture can all influence dramatically whether working in teams leads to productivity gains or losses.

However, teams at work can overcome some of the problems that have been identified so far, such as social loafing and poor decision making or not having an appropriate task.

According to the theory proposed by Guzzo (1996), Cohen & Bailey (1997) the disadvantages of working in teams may be reduced in the following ways.

Teams should have intrinsically interesting tasks to perform. People will work together if the tasks they are asked to perform are intrinsically interesting, motivating, challenging and enjoyable. Where people are required to fit the same nut on the same bolt hour after hour, day after day, they are unlikely to be motivated and committed to their work. Where teams have an inherently interesting task to perform there is generally high commitment, higher motivation and more cooperative working. This therefore calls for very careful design of the objectives and tasks of work teams.

Individuals should feel they are important to the fate of the team. Social loafing effects are most likely to occur when people believe that their contributions to the team are dispensable. For example, in working with primary health care teams, my colleagues and I have some nurses and

receptionists feel their work is not highly valued. One way that individuals can come to feel that their work is important to the fate of the team is by using techniques of role clarification and negotiation. By careful exploration of the roles of each team member, together with the identification of team and individual objectives, team members can experience and demonstrate to other team members the importance of their work to the success of the team overall.

Individuals should have intrinsically interesting tasks to perform. Individual tasks should be meaningful and inherently rewarding. Just as it is important for a team to have an intrinsically interesting task to perform, so too will individuals work harder be more committed and creative if the tasks they are performing are engaging and challenging. For example, a researcher sitting on team meetings and observing team processes is more motivated, and has a more creative orientation toward the task, than the researcher who is required to input data from the questionnaires onto a computer.

Individual contributions should be indispensable, unique and evaluated against a standard. Research on social loafing indicates that the effect is considerably reduced where people perceive their work to be indispensable to the performance of the team as a whole. Equally important, however, is that individual work should be subject to evaluation. People have to feel that not only is their work indispensable, but also that their performance is visible to other members of the team.

In laboratory settings, where team members know that the products of their performance will be observed by other members of the team; they are much

more likely to maintain effort to the level which they would achieve normally in individual performance.

There should be clear team goals with in-built performance feedback. For the same reasons that it is important for individuals to have clear goals and performance feedback, so too is it important for the team as a whole to have clear team goals with performance feedback. Research evidence shows very consistently that where people are clear targets to aim at; their performance is generally improved (Locke & Latham, 1991). However, goals can only function as a motivator of team performance and only if accurate performance feedback is available.

Thus, we can say that the effectiveness of teams on a number of factors which can subdue or improve the performance of teams.

Processes like social loafing, hierarchical effects, and personality differences curb team performance. Within the organization teams are usually put together and allowed to function without attempts which ensure effective functioning. Also at the same time in order to promote teams for its effectiveness organizations must receive clear and accurate feedback.