Advantages and disadvantages of team working

Team working is becoming the basic building block of many organisations (Boddy 2008: 558), with the implementation of teams being one of the most accepted types of organisational progression and improvement in recent times. Teams have been defined as focused groups, which exhibit a unitary perspective (McGregor 1960, Douglas 1983 in Ingram 1999), and ' a group of people who are interdependent with respect to information, resources and skills and who seek to combine their efforts to achieve a common goal' (Thompson 2000: 2). Contemporary organisations have recognised the number of benefits teams in the workplace can bring including creativity and innovation, promoting a ' culture of expression and involvement' (Reed 1992: 227), improved quality and productivity, and enhanced commitment.

On the other hand, critics of teamwork argue that its introduction into the workplace can create higher workloads, resulting in higher stress levels and work pressure. They warn that team systems may encourage employees to internalize managerial definitions of their work situations, resulting in management control increasing. Such pessimistic views of teams support the argument that they are implemented as ' merely another instrument of management control' and therefore do not benefit employees. Due to the purpose of teams being implemented to enhance management control from this outlook, teams could actually develop interpersonal conflict and a greater risk of health problems, especially if demands from management increase, without teams being given the necessary scope for control and decision-making. Teams can thus create higher levels of stress and work pressure. Although many commentators agree with this perspective, careful consideration has to be made as to whether it is realistic to assume that

teamwork is implemented for the direct purpose of management control without any other motives? Firstly we must understand what is meant by ' control'. According to Edwards (1986) there is an important distinction between ' detailed' and ' general' control. Detailed control refers to those who make the decisions about how ' immediate work tasks are to be carried out', and general control ' covers the broader issue of securing workers' commitment to the aims of the enterprise' (Geary and Dobbins 2006). These definitions of control demonstrate that control is not simply ' a zero-sum phenomenon' (2006: 6) and although as part of a manager's role they seek to obtain greater influence over the organisations operations such as work allocation and resource levels, in the concept of general control, this does not ' involve taking something from employees' (2006: 6).

If it is argued to be the case that teamwork is used to excerpt control, the question of why this method is now being used must be asked. Why is it that the traditional managerial approaches appeared to be increasingly inadequate? It could be argued that managers became progressively more concerned as their organisations grow beyond the point where they can exercise their leadership through personal contact with every employee. Using teams would therefore make it less demanding for the ' force their personal know how' to be ' channelled through the medium of other persons and the organisational structures of their company' (Vallas 2003). It is because of opportunity for growth, globalisation and expansion in the current high performance industries that firms feel the need to undergo significant change to redefine the disposition of managerial authority and control (Powell 2001). As organisations are increasingly expanding the task of

managing employees is becoming complex, as they have to ensure not to regulate employees too strictly and forcefully as this will have a negative impact on the workers morale, and will inevitably constrain their creativity and commitment to management goals. However, if managers empower employees a large amount they run the risk of loosing control.

Teamwork has been strongly supported and promoted by leading management theorists (Drucker 1988, Peters 1989) and total quality management (TQM) advocates. Barker and Tompkins (1994: 224 in Ezzamel and Willmott 1998) claim the move towards teamwork is ' currently the most popular form of organisational restructuring' and has been increasingly introduced into companies to develop lean production, and high commitment workforces. As there is a global economic expansion and instability of change and competitiveness, organisations need to train and develop employees in ways that tangibly benefit performance and productivity. Zeffane (1992) argues that the key to business success revolves around how a firm uses and involves its workers to contribute to the organisational culture which is defined as ' The deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organisation, that operate unconsciously, and that define in a basic " taken for granted" fashion an organisations view of itself and its environment.' (Schein 1984). This definition assumes that the organisational culture has little to do with the managers, however Lorsch (1996: 95) states it is ' The shared beliefs that top managers in a company have about how they should manage themselves and other employees […] These beliefs are often invisible to top managers but have a major impact on their thoughts and actions'. Managers

therefore have a major influence on the organisational culture, and academics such as Peters and Waterman (1982) argue there is a strong link between cultures and performance. Creating a teamwork culture within the working environment is fundamental if managers are to achieve their goals through the operation of teamwork.

Studies (Parker and Slaughter 1988) have illustrated that when combined with supportive human resource (HR) policies, teamwork practices can significantly ' disempower employees by strengthening managerial control and intensifying work activity in the name of progress' (Ezzamel and Willmott 1998: 358). Tjosvold (1991: 85-86 in Ezzamel and Willmott 1998) agrees and suggests that teamwork is a new means of management control as it yields ' ultimate competitive advantage' as ' workers invent new ways to reduce costs and improve product quality'. In today's working environment, this clearly benefits the managers and ensures their goals are being achieved. For a manager to be successful in their job, they must continuously make improvements. According to Robbins et al (2008) the teams do the brainstorming on problems, and often innovate and produce productivity improvements between themselves.

It is argued that teamwork has many benefits to its members including ' enhanced skills and an increase in autonomy.' (Geary and Dobbins 2006: 1). From this viewpoint it seems that management's intentions are to empower employees, creating a better working environment and satisfying social needs. Human relations writers agree and have identified the value of teams as being essential to psychological well being because they reflect the basic human need for social bonds. However, through good leadership, group

behaviour supports rather than undermines the objectives of management, thus supporting the argument teamwork can enhance management control and again indicates that management predominantly enjoys the benefits of teams. None the less, Walton (1985) states that the organisation of workers into teams creates a change from the traditional managerial style ' management of control' to the ' management of commitment'. In Walton's view therefore, teamwork has the opposite intention of preserving and strengthening management control, it in fact creates ' a progressive withdrawal of management control in favour of employee autonomy' (Gallie et al 1998: 57 in Geary and Dobbins 2006). It is clear to see that the arguments as to why teams are implemented are exceptionally complex, and in many cases they are not used for solely one purpose.

The assumption that teamwork is put into practice merely as an instrument of control suggests that this is a manager's primary and most imperative role. However, management is far more intricate, and the empowerment literature argues management is not merely about domineering employees; they also have to extract employees' creativities and skills and an often-successful way of doing this is through teamwork. Nevertheless, the benefits to management seem to far out weigh the benefits for the employees. Assertions that team working provides ' opportunity to express and receive ideas' (Boddy 2010: 559) and contributes towards a better quality of working life can be seen as being very ideological. Barker (1993, 1999) and Graham (1995) both agree that team systems broaden regular control over employees, bringing workers into ' closer and more frequent contact with management'. Consequently, it can be assumed that the motives for

initiating teamwork are not completely honourable. ' New' management motives have not changed from their traditional ones; in actual fact their desire for enforcing control can be considered to have risen, due to increasing pressures and the need to maintain flawless high standards because of constantly broadening competition, it is therefore only their methods that have altered. Further studies (Parker and Slaughter 1988, Garrahan and Stewart 1992) have found that teamwork practices can actually create a sense of less importance and power for the employees by reinforcing managerial control and increasing workloads in order to enhance and develop the company. Sennett (1998) concurs with this argument, claiming that team working increases and improves the supervisor's authority and power, but without having any responsibility for the teams' actions.

Teamworking is often employed in high performance work places and offers a more holistic approach to work, providing greater flexibility for employees in an organisation that adopts flat hierarchical structures. This is unlike the Taylorist work organisation, which is characterised by a pyramid hierarchical structure and a centralisation of responsibilities. Wood and Albanese (1995) argue teamwork forms part of a movement towards less control, and higher commitment workforces. Walton (1985) and Likert (1961) agree with this perspective as Likert (1961: 104 in Boddy 2010: 560) argues ' each person […] is a member of one or more functioning workgroups that have a high degree of group loyalty' and therefore commitment. Teamwork can therefore be seen to have more uses than purely controlling empolyees.

Sharpe (2002) conducted an in-depth analysis of processes of ' team' working within a Japanese-owned shop floor manufacturing setting within the UK, using an ethnographic, participant observation approach. She found that the ' team leaders' and supervisors utilised features facilitated by the organisation to develop a sense of ' team identity and responsibility' (Sharpe 2002: 273). The findings also highlighted the managerial control system implemented through the use of teams, for example applying quality assurance, segregated rest areas, ensuring there is little opportunity to interact across teams. The teams were organised formally around an authority structure, and regular team meetings were held, where the team leader would emphasise commitment, improving standards and quality. This developed a sense of team loyalty and also social control. Management therefore indirectly used teams to control employees. The social control found emphasised the new pressures that existed within the team members as they did not want to let their fellow work mates down, and wanted to maintain the same standards. These findings support Likert's (1961) argument that managers deliberately place people into groups so they develop strong relationships and loyalty, which has an affect on high performance goals. In this study it appears that teamwork was implemented to ' encourage people to identify with the company, achieve a common outlook, develop commitment and improve the absenteeism record' (Sharpe 2002: 274). Teams became the new management practice in this company, and were used to produce ' social means of control' on the assembly line, thus supporting the argument that ' teamwork is merely another instrument of management control'.

Geary and Dobbins' (2006) examined the operation of teamworking in an Irish subsidiary of a large US company. They found that traditionally the company was hierarchically structured, with ' supervisors making the majority of decisions in regard to work organisation' (Geary and Dobbins 2006: 9) and a strict authoritarian management style. The findings demonstrated that prior to management's formal introduction of teams, there was previously already significant teamworking taking place. Employees reported considerable levels of satisfaction from working in teams and they benefited from a fair amount of responsibility over how to do a task, the pace of work, and which tasks to undertake. On the other hand, over half of the respondents stated that management ' exercised considerable control over group decision making and the implementation of decisions' (Geary and Dobbins 2006: 11). Although the results were mixed, the majority of employees reported that supervision and control had intensified, as the number of supervisors remained unchanged during the restructuring of the organisation. It appears as though the company were making a concerted effort to move away from a ' traditional supervisory regime' and alter disciplinary procedures to make them less arbitrary and unfair, which are all improvements designed to create a better working environment for employees. Therefore the introduction of teams within this company brought numerous benefits to the workers and many felt empowered satisfied and rewarded despite the fact that they experience intensification in effort and pressure levels. This study therefore provides a valid criticism to the argument that teams are implemented simply as a tool for control as the new organisational structure evidently benefited the employees. Harris and Harris (1989) support Geary and Dobbins, arguing

that the teamwork culture within organisations gives workers greater control, and provides them with the opportunities to take responsibilities that have previously belonged to supervisors.

In conclusion, supporters of teamwork argue that teams can provide a more satisfying and rewarding working environment benefiting both the employees and the organisation as a whole. Within teams there will be a variety of skills and experiences that are expected to surpass those of any individual, which will inevitably lead to progression and enhancement of working methods, systems and processes, productivity, and service and quality. As the discussion and debate indicates, new forms of work organisation, and specifically the implementation of teamwork are likely to be launched for more than a single purpose by management. Teamworking within an organisation has multiple aims and benefits both for the employee and employer, one of which is the implementation of control. Teams can be seen to ' support, supplement, substitute' (Huusko 2007) and even negate management impact on employees. The reorganisation of workers into teams often has a major impact on the roles of supervisors and subordinates. Although many contrasting arguments have been discussed, I believe teamwork is not implemented for the primary purpose of increasing or continuing management control. There are many advantages and disadvantages of a teamworking system, including feelings of well rounded work and common goals, but also the ' feelings of erased job classifications and un-defined positions' (Morgan 1989: 131) because if teams are put into operation inadequately there is uncertainty concerning duties and responsibilities. I agree with Edwards et al (2001) who argue that

management initiatives are ' more limited and controlled that the enthusiasts claim, but more constructive than the critics admit'. It is almost impossible to say whether teams are used as a new method to impose control by management as the intentions and consequences of management are so complex and variable. From the discussion above, it would appear as though team work is used to benefit the company as a whole, and one of the benefits that automatically occurs is the ability for management to exercise more control.