Teams, Task Forces & Bureaucrats
Centralization vs. Decentralization

Ever since man discovered structured ways of getting work done, we have dabbled in defining better ways to organize to do work and to lead the workforce. All through the 20th century, we listened to arguments about centralization vs. decentralization. (Have you ever noticed that if a consultant is called in to look at a centralized organization, he will recommend decentralizing? But if called in to look at a decentralized organization, he will recommend centralization.) We heard discourses and criticism of the bureaucratic form of organization, and discussion on exploitative authoritarian leadership, vs. benevolent authoritarian leadership, vs. consultative, vs. participative.

However, even in the most structured organizations, it didn't take long to recognize that there were certain situations that were better addressed outside of the formal, fixed structure. Yet, there are always diehards, who will resist exceptions to the very end. Take this situation, for example:

The Bureaucrats

A few years ago, I was called in by a company, an HMO, which had just been handed a virtually unachievable deadline. The HMO had recently received government approval to start a new service and was in the early stages of a four-month program to implement the new offering. Coincident to this, this HMO announced the acquisition of another HMO agency, which was already approved and committed to offer the new service. As a consequence, the federal program that was approved to start in four months was now required to be operating in six weeks. This deadline, under the best possible circumstances, would appear to be an impossible task.

However, this HMO did not have the best possible circumstances. They operated under very rigid boundaries, within a traditional hierarchy. Each discipline within the organization had its own director, and all practices required going through the directors for action. The boundaries were like stonewalls.

With at least four months of work to be accomplished in this six-week period, I asked if the company had set up an emergency team, with representatives of each stakeholder group. I was told that this company did not believe in any type of task force arrangement, under any circumstances. When I asked how each of the stakeholder groups communicated and coordinated their efforts in support of this high priority program, I was told that the directors of each group met monthly. My pressing for an exception in this instance met with total resistance.

The Task Force

I have no intention here to get into a discussion on the advantages or disadvantages of a highly structured, rigid organization. But I do want to press for the acceptance of exceptions to such formal structures, when a situation such as the one described above arises. In the above example, surely a task force approach is almost mandatory. In this case, I would have had the Manager of Senior Services (the critical stakeholder) head up a team of representatives of each contributing department. These representatives would be authorized to make decisions for their discipline (following procedures that were set up by the director of each department). They would be dedicated to the special project to whatever level of effort was required to accomplish the goal.

The task force would meet frequently (at least once a week) to communicate results and resolve outstanding concerns. The task force members would communicate with other contributors from their discipline and coordinate their efforts. At the initial task force meeting, the team would develop a project plan and would disseminate the plan and obtain supporting commitments from members of their department. The task force leader would be able to communicate freely with the task force members and establish commitments and program results without having to go through the department directors, or to wait for a monthly meeting.

Although this is a significant deviation from the rigid structure that was in place in this organization, the use of a task force in this situation should not be looked at as an attack on the establishment. It is a temporary organization, formed for a specific objective. When the goal has been met, everything returns to normal.

Success Stories

The task force model can work for the most varied situations. Here is an example of three scenarios where the task force or special team approached proved to be very successful.

Case #1 - Design Crisis

As a designer of nuclear propulsion systems for the United States Navy, this organization was involved in overseeing the design and manufacture of the core for a shipboard nuclear reactor. This element was one of thousands of critical components being built for a prototype vessel, to a tight schedule. Suddenly, the manufacturing contractor discovered that the intended method for welding the fuel elements was not going to work, putting the entire program on hold for this critical component.

Immediately, a task force was called together, with representatives of all of the concerned groups within the organization. The task force leader -- a department head -- called the team together and led in the development of a thirteen-week schedule to resolve the problem. Weekly meetings were held -- not to hear any excuses of delays or failure -- but

only to communicate results. The schedule was refined only once, during the first week and was then frozen. Everyone shared the sense of commitment and produced as was expected and required. At the end of the thirteen weeks, the desired remedy was achieved and the program moved forward.

It is doubtful that this kind of commitment, cooperation, and execution would have been achieved within the normal, day-to-day operations of the organization. In this task force mode, the team was able to focus on the critical problem, somewhat free of conflicts with other obligations. The high priority of the task force assignment was clear and effective.

Case #2 - Strategic Plan

An Engineering-Design organization was asked to develop a strategic plan. The organization was to (1) identify areas of expertise and opportunity; (2) identify what was needed to build expertise to position the organization as first or second (in business performance) in five selected capability areas; (3) to develop a plan to prioritize and excel in these five selected areas.

A strategic planning team was called together for this purpose. Although the primary membership in this team was engineering and design managers, the team leader was actually a much lower statused individual, but one with strategic and management planning expertise. As an example of today's tendency to recognize knowledge power as equal or superior to position power, the managers willingly followed the lead of this individual as he guided the team to the successful development of the strategic plan.

In this instance, borders were crossed and the traditional hierarchy was inverted. And everyone was pleased with the results. The objective was achieved, by a group of people who had not previously been involved in developing a strategic plan. The establishment of a temporary team, with a common objective, helped to break down any of the traditional territorial defenses.

Case #3 - Developing New Practices and Systems

In this case, the firm was a leader in the power generation and power delivery equipment industry and had built a growing business in delivering turnkey power generation solutions. However, the firm was not entirely satisfied with the results (financial and other) of these projects. Senior management decided that the entire method of managing such projects needed to be evaluated and, if found wanting, should be replaced with improved methods.

A task force was established, made up of six individuals with expertise in the areas associated with developing new practices and systems to support project management. These included PM experts, finance experts, systems developers, and training professionals. The team set out first to determine what methods were desired to manage the turnkey projects. Having gained consensus and approval of the proposed methods, they then defined and developed the computer systems to support the new methods. The team continued to operate as they led in the development and execution of training

programs, to indoctrinate the organization in the new methods and systems. Finally, selected members of the original task force were engaged to audit the implementation of the new practices, and to assist in mentoring individuals in support of the program.

The task force activities were executed over about a two-year period. All task force members carried on other, normal activities in addition to their special obligations to this program. For their normal activities, they reported to and took direction from their direct managers. For the task force activities, they were directed by a manager who was assigned to oversee the work of the task force and to facilitate reaching organization-wide consensus and approvals. Because the work of the task force continued over a long period of time, this manager was invited to contribute to the periodic employee evaluations for the task force members.

The full set of objectives for the program was achieved, and a major part of the organization was trained in the application of the practices and tools. Several decades later (with some upgrading) the basic set of practices and systems was still in use.

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In the 1990's, the concepts of teams reached a high level of acceptance. It has led to a newer organization style, coined *Teamocracy* by David Cleland. Teams for everything. Teams for Concurrent Engineering. Self-managed Production Teams. Teams for Reengineering. Teams for the current crisis. Teams for projects.

The concept of the task force goes back much further, and for most organizations, was recognized as a practical way of braking down provincial barriers, expediting critical work, and bringing about faster, better solutions for special situations. It would seem that, with the acknowledged success of teams, in the past decade, which it would not be necessary to build a case for the task force method. But the experience mentioned at the start of this paper reminds us that sometimes even the most accepted practices have to be sold to the few diehard defenders of rigid hierarchical structures. Hopefully, the illustrations of success, in these three very different situations, will help to convince them otherwise.

In today's business environment, teams and task forces may become the norm, rather than the exception. There is serious evidence, from David Cleland, Tom Peters, Robert Waterman, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, and many others, to support these operational modes. My own personal experiences fully support this premise.

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