

5

Project Teams and Groups

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Learning objectives

By the time you have completed this chapter you should be able to:

- Recognise and understand the significance of teams in contemporary organisations
- Understand the process of creating the project team
- Understand the importance of virtual teams in contemporary organisations
- Gain an awareness of the stages of team development and group dynamics
- Understand the differences between a group and a team
- Consider some of the dysfunctional aspects of teams and barriers to their development

5.1 Introduction

There are many well-founded and apparently obvious reasons why organisations form teams. Teams have a strong intuitive appeal in that we assume a team must be more effective and efficient in achieving a task than a collection of individuals working alongside each other. It is claimed that people working in teams produce more, are happier and more confident, and share a commitment to the team and its objectives. It is also argued that teams harness the capabilities and capacities of each individual which in turn produces better decisions and allows for problem-solving and flexibility. It is further claimed that teams produce synergy, that a team is $2 + 2 = 5$, where ideas flow from member to member and are turned into reality by people with a shared vision. As attractive as these arguments might appear, we cannot accept them at face value and must question

and examine the role of teams in organisations, for if it were so simple each and every organisation could simply re-designate their various work groups as teams and all of their perceived benefits would flow to the organisation.

Some of the questions we will consider in this chapter include, what is a team and why do organisations form them? Is a team different from a group? Do teams come fully-formed or do they go through stages of development? What are the strengths and weaknesses of a team-based approach to work? What are the characteristics of an effective team?

Groups are by no means restricted to the workplace; they play a central role in our lives and Huczyniski and Buchanan (2015) point out that each of us is on average a member of five or six groups and they distinguish between primary and secondary groups. Primary groups are those such as family and close, life-long friends, that provide us with psychological and emotional support and to whom we have strong connections. Secondary groups are akin to associations or affiliations with like-minded people. For example, membership of a sport or hobby club such as country dancing or a member of a choir, and these are groups that people choose to join. Secondary groups also encompass work relationships, where labour is exchanged for payment and where the relationships between members might be termed transactional, but it is groups within a work context that we are concerned with here.

5.2 Team work in contemporary organisations

As organisations have become flatter and less hierarchical in recent years, they have placed an ever-increasing emphasis on the human resource (people) and explored ways of leveraging the knowledge and talents of employees by granting them greater autonomy and discretion over their work. Robbins (2012) cites research that demonstrates the extent to which teams have become the new norm in organisations. The same research highlighted the extent of this trend by pointing out that 66% of EU workers perform part of their work in teams and across Europe, team-working is most common in the UK where 81% of employees report working in teams, with the lowest levels found in Italy and Lithuania at 41 and 38% respectively. The predominance of teamworking is in manufacturing rather than service sectors, but in the USA 54% of the 600 leading companies use self-directed teams. In Europe, some form of teamworking exists in 36% of all workplaces. Australia witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of people working in teams, rising from 8% to 47% between 1988 and 1991. According to Thompson and McHugh (2004), 72% of British workplaces have at least some core employees in formally designated teams, with 80% of workplaces with

teams extending them to three-fifths of core employees and of these, 66% had trained some staff to be functionally flexible. Further, 21% had groups of non-managerial employees who met to solve specific problems such as quality or performance. These figures suggest strongly that teams are more than a passing fad and are here for the foreseeable future, so an understanding of them is critical to managerial and organisational success.

5.3 Project teams and virtual teams

You will be aware from other parts of your study of project management that a project team is a temporary organisation brought together for a specific purpose and it has many of the characteristics of a short-life team or cross-functional team. Many of these teams share common characteristics in that they are groups of people with complementary skills and knowledge brought together either to address a specific problem or deliver a project. A project team has a specific purpose, leadership of it will have been formally ascribed to a single person, everyone in it should be clear on their role and area of responsibility and they should be clear about who it is they report to. A project team can vary in size from three or four people based in the same building to one that is geographically diverse and with members based in different time zones.

A recent development in teams and groups has been the advent of virtual teams. According to Huczynski and Buchanan (2015; 337) a virtual team is one that “relies on technology-mediated communication, while crossing boundaries of geography, time, culture and organisation, to accomplish an interdependent task. A global virtual team is one that is nationally, geographically and culturally diverse and which communicates almost exclusively through electronic media”. They also point out that a virtual team can be of the single-country or multi-country type and if it is the latter, it is termed a global virtual team. The question of whether a team might be identified as virtual or not is explored by Zigurs (2003) and she argues that rather than thinking of a team as either ‘virtual’ or not, it makes sense to consider them on a ‘continuum of virtuality’. Zigurs identified four key features of virtual teams as geographic dispersion, temporal dispersion, cultural dispersion and, organisational dispersion, and she points out that virtual teams have a common goal and rely on technology yet they have to deal with dispersion on a variety of dimensions.

Many large multi-national, global organisations including Apple, Microsoft, Atkins Global, Rolls-Royce, EADS (Airbus consortium) and Boeing use virtual project teams. Atkins Global, a British multi-national, for example, has approximately 18,000 employees in 25 different countries with a number of virtual teams