Making public sector teams more effective

Teams produce better results than individuals working alone and they make the work environment more interesting and exciting. SHANAAZ MAJIET analyses what makes teams effective.

The 'team' label is often used interchangeably with 'group' and yet team has a very specific meaning. The difference largely lies in the direction of action. A group can exist and yet not achieve much. A team, on the other hand, is action oriented. It has a clear purpose, which is shared by its members.

There are a number of features of a team that make it different from a group:

- In an effective team, members share a high level of commitment to achieving the common objective.
- Members experience a high level of satisfaction from being part of and working with the team.
- Members work well together in an integrated way, with a high level of awareness and appreciation of each other's strengths.
- An effective team shows a high capability for solving its own problems.
- Most important from the organisation's point of view, an effective team is one producing high quality results.

Clear objectives

The team's overall objective needs to be defined in terms that allow each member to understand the goal. The leader has an important role in communicating a clear picture of what the organisation expects from the team. A style that encourages a questioning approach is likely to bring to light doubts, misunderstandings or resistances, which need to be positively managed.

Appropriate leadership

Leadership is a shared function based on the task rather than a formal role or position-based power. This requires considerable flexibility in recognising and allowing other team members to exercise real leadership when a member's skills are more appropriate to the team at that time.

Suitable membership

For a team to work productively, its members must display a range of skills, knowledge and experience and the right mix of these for the task it is undertaking. Members are valued for what they can contribute and are encouraged to develop. Little time is wasted on considerations of what members cannot do. The emphasis is on strengths, on the positive.

A supportive team climate

The order of the day is participation and personal responsibility. Members are trusted to contribute in a mature fashion. Self-control replaces imposed control. Responsibility is widely shared throughout the team on a rational basis, given the skills and strengths among members. Members are encouraged to contribute ideas, take risks and question the team and its activities openly without fear of censorship, disapproval or reprimand. The only condition is that their behaviour is with the best interest of the team and its performance at heart.

Getting things done

The successful team not only knows where it is going, it knows when it has arrived. It sets performance targets and milestones and establishes ways in which to move toward achieving targets that can be measured. It is important that performance targets represent something of a challenge to the team and its members without being unrealistic and consequently demoralising. When the right performance standards are set, the team's energy is directed towards achieving results.

Working techniques

The team needs to invest time and effort in developing working techniques and ground rules to move the team towards its goal in the most efficient way, while preserving those other qualities associated with effective teams. These include techniques for making decisions, solving problems and generally coping with anything that gets in the way of progress.

Learning from mistakes

The team and its members learn from their experiences, including their mistakes. Mistakes made in good faith do not lead to heavy penalties, but are incorporated into expectations about the team and its members maturing over time.

Problems are analysed for what they can contribute to the individual and collective maturing process. Constructive criticism, based on logic and rationality and intended to help the team and its members grow in competence is welcomed.

New members

New team members are quickly integrated into the team, their strengths identified, and contribution defined. Every effort is made to help the new member prove their value to the team.

Managing the group

An effective team recognises the importance of monitoring the team itself and the way in which it is working. Allocating time and energy to understanding and managing relationships is an important investment. The team leader should have considerable competence in this respect, but responsibility for monitoring events is shared among members, although some will be more competent than others and show preferences in the direction of 'team maintenance'.

Relationships with other teams

An effective team invests in developing ground rules for managing its relationships with other teams in a positive and productive way. This includes identifying areas of work where collaboration would clearly help one or both teams achieve results more efficiently or effectively. It includes maintaining open contact, reviewing priorities and sharing resources where this will help progress toward a broader, organisational objective.

Success is catching

The effectiveness of a team grows. The conditions set out here develop more extensively and as the team meets with early, continued and acknowledged success. The cliché, 'nothing succeeds like success' is entirely applicable to the development of effective teams.

But two possible problems exist for very successful teams. First, they may be seen as so competent that they attract more work than they are able to handle resulting in overload and decline in performance. They may have to learn to say 'no'. Even if they attract more resources of money and people to handle the extra work, they may suffer from problems of "bigness" and will almost certainly need to restructure into smaller satellites if they are to continue successfully.

The second problem for the successful group is complacency. They can become fat cats. Their very success and cohesion becomes their own worst enemy, and they find it difficult to respond to new circumstances. Some groups guard against this with a fairly regular turnover of people to keep them on their toes.

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