2

Effective Organizational Support for Teams

Some organizations have been very successful in making the shift to a team environment. Others have not done so well. There is a compelling reason for organizations to help work groups become effective, however. Based on our assessments of more than 1,600 work groups whose members had been working together for 6 months or more, only about half those groups were capable of contributing to their organization's goals; the other half were not. Of the 1,600 work groups, only 20% were high performance teams. Although organizational support is not the only thing that work groups need, it plays a key role.

This chapter outlines what research and theory teach us about the role of the organization in facilitating or inhibiting the development of high performance work teams. That role is quite large and very important, but it receives little organizational attention. The reason for this is simple: It is easier to create work groups and focus our efforts on group results than to address organizational issues that may be inhibiting group performance. If organizations want effective teams, however, all organization members, especially upper management, should consider using the following guidelines to create them.

Plant Groups in a Favorable Organizational Climate

Work groups and teams function better in an organizational culture that encourages high performance by following these principles:

- Clearly define the organization's mission.

- Support innovation.

- Expect success.

- Value superior quality and service.

- Pay attention to detail.

- Value team recommendations.

- Set clear expectations for group output, quality, timing, and pacing.

- Reward teamwork rather than individual performance.

We discuss each of these principles in more detail in this section.

Clearly Define the Organization's Mission

Groups flourish when their members are clear about what business they are in. This may seem obvious, but it is not always so. Once one of us asked a group what the mission of its organization was, and the members did not know, despite the fact that the organization's mission statement was clearly displayed on the wall of the group's meeting room. In another case, a group was asked what its organization's mission was, and the members sang the mission statement. Their singing was not sweet or lyrical; it was a singsong that expressed derision and disrespect. Organization members need not only to know the words contained in the mission statement but also to understand and believe those words.

Support Innovation

Some organizations tend to do things the way they've always been done. In organizations where this is the case, or organization members believe it is the case, groups will have more difficulty being successful. When you put people together as a group, combining their intelligence and creativity, it often leads members to come up with new and unexpected ideas and solutions. If the group is functioning in an organization that encourages new ideas and new ways of doing things, group members feel energized and supported. If not, group members quickly become dispirited and begin to believe that there is no point to making suggestions that challenge the status quo.

Expect Success

Some organizations don't expect to be successful. This may sound absurd, but there are many examples of this attitude expressed in different ways by organization members. Here are just a few:

"What do you expect? This is a government agency."

"The CEO is leaving soon and doesn't really care about what we do."

"We're going to be merged anyway."

"People would rather be safe than successful."

If attitudes such as these exist in an organizational culture, group members will not give their best effort because they believe that giving 100% is not encouraged or valued.

Value Superior Quality and Service

In the real world, there is always some tension among quality, service, and profit. However, if organization members perceive that profit is more important than quality and service, they will become dispirited and cynical. Some examples of how this is expressed are as follows:

"People care more about their stock options than doing a good job."

"They want us to pretend to be working to keep the inspectors off our backs."

"They talk about customer service, but they don't really mean it."

Pay Attention to Detail

"Get a group together and work out this policy issue" is an example of a directive from upper management that has no detail and leaves the group leader with little to go on. The alternative would be for management to give the group leader a clear definition of the group's task, all backup materials, and awareness and planning about group membership, timelines, meeting times, workloads, availability of potential members, and the like.

Value Team Recommendations

If group members believe that whatever they come up with will be rejected or changed by upper management, the chances of group success are diminished. If group leaders are told in advance what the group should come up with, success is even more unlikely. Again, this is self-evident, but unfortunately examples of such situations are all too common. In an environment where team recommendations are not valued, it is clear to all that groups are used to make the organization seem to be seeking group input when, in fact, it is not.

Set Clear Expectations for Group Output, Quality, Timing, and Pacing

If the group is given realistic guidelines and goals for what members are expected to produce and by when, the chances of success are much higher. For

example, it is unrealistic to give a group 2 months to complete a complex task, especially if the members of that group have not worked together as a group in the past. It is also unrealistic to give a group a long-term project without some way of measuring progress along the way.

Reward Teamwork Rather Than Individual Performance

How to reward teamwork rather than individual performance is one of the most difficult issues that organizations face with regard to setting up work groups. Most compensation systems are designed to evaluate and reward individual contributions, not team contributions. If individuals are to be motivated to create a high performance team, however, then the team's performance should be a determinant of compensation and bonuses.

Team compensation systems are discussed and written about quite a lot. However, most organizations still do not have team compensation systems in place. When the first four editions of *Creating Effective Teams* were published, few team compensation systems were available. That is no longer the case. Despite the availability of those models, however, many organizations still have not made the shift to team compensation.

Some organizations use recognition of team performance as a substitute for financial reward. Although this is helpful in some cases, this type of recognition has to be thought out carefully. Sometimes recognition of one team may create competition between teams. This can inhibit performance, because most teams rely on cooperation from other teams to accomplish their goals. In other cases, the kind of recognition can be a source of embarrassment to some team members.

Successful team compensation strategies are now readily available. Compensating employees for meeting their individual goals and for membership on a team that met its goals and objectives is the right combination. Organizations that do not have this combination will not get maximum results from their teams.

Give Groups What They Need to Do Their Best

Work groups function better in organizations that establish

- meaningful group goals and tasks that require skill, have variety, and require interdependence;

- meaningful group goals and tasks that require continuous learning;

- access to the human resources necessary to accomplish group goals;

- access to the technical resources necessary to accomplish tasks; and

- defined team work areas.

Establish Meaningful Group Goals and Tasks That Require Skill, Have Variety, and Require Interdependence

Group members function better when they feel that group goals and tasks are meaningful, are interesting, and challenge them to think and work to capacity. If tasks are seen as routine or boring, motivation is diminished. Of course, many organizational tasks are routine or boring but still must be done. A team format may not be the best way to accomplish those tasks.

Group goals and tasks also should require interdependence. That is, a team should be necessary to accomplish them. Again, this seems self-evident, but a few examples will make it obvious that many groups have goals and tasks that do not require members to work together. These groups are treated as teams but, in fact, are not teams. Examples include the following:

- Phone solicitors who work independently but are called a team and meet once a week to discuss team performance

- Salespeople who work independently, are paid for individual sales, and meet once a month to discuss team performance

- The top 50 administrators in an organization, who meet monthly to hear a report from the CEO

- People who report to the same boss but don't interact with each other at any other time

Establish Meaningful Group Goals and Tasks That Require Continuous Learning

Groups with goals and tasks that require continuous learning are the most successful groups. In fact, the best thing about a group with such goals and tasks is that its members will learn from each other and will seek out information to learn more about how to proceed. If a group's goals and tasks don't require new learning, a group format is probably not necessary for their accomplishment. Give group members the tools they need to be successful.

Establish Access to the Human Resources Necessary to Accomplish Group Goals

A group that is expected to produce a new product on time and under budget but with no authority over or access to the people who set production schedules will not be successful. A group that is expected to determine best practices in a certain area but has no budget to visit other organizations or to consult experts in the area will probably be unsuccessful. A group that is mired in conflict and cannot ask for assistance from an internal or external

consultant to help them work out their differences also will have great difficulty being successful. Make sure that team members have the help they need.

Establish Access to the Technical Resources Necessary to Accomplish Tasks

You can't build a house without tools. Yet some teams we've worked with were expected to accomplish tasks without even minimal access to computer equipment, fax machines, computer programs, archival materials, and other resources necessary for goal achievement.

Establish Defined Team Work Areas and Functional Communication Tools

For groups in the same location, a defined work area is very useful. Proximity makes communication easier, and the work progresses faster. After all, we are still human. We don't need to know other members intimately, but we do need to know people's thoughts and attitudes about the work we are doing together. Organizations whose group members are spread out over large geographic areas have had to find new ways to communicate. We have become used to conference calls, videoconferencing, group discussions via e-mail, and chat rooms. Some research in this area suggests that these forms of work group interaction can work well. With continuously improved communication tools and a growing proportion of the workforce having grown up with information technology and used it not only at work but also to manage personal relationships, working in virtual teams that communicate with the help of information technology will become increasingly normal. That doesn't mean it will not change how we work and collaborate in work groups. Most likely it will, in some ways for better and in other ways for worse. We have yet to find out what the impact of distance and technology will be on team processes, team effectiveness, and the experience of being a team member.

Pick Members Based on Their Ability to Do the Task and Their Ability to Contribute to Group Success

What is known about effective members is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5. This chapter is about how organizations can support their work groups. Selecting and recruiting new employees to an organization and then composing teams is a way organizations exert considerable influence on teams. According to recent research there is a correlation between personality and work group effectiveness. These findings are useful for selection and recruitment and when teams are being composed. Research shows us that it is beneficial for a group's performance to have members who have an innate desire to make an effort and work diligently toward high goals (conscientiousness), and

who are naturally considerate and helpful to other group members (agreeableness). Agreeableness, unlike conscientiousness, has no impact on individual task performance. It becomes important when people work together on a task that makes them interdependent. Members' ability to maintain a sufficiently supportive and flexible approach to other members across time and situations has an impact on collaboration and hence on productivity. Also, deeply held values like a preference for teamwork and a collectivist approach to work are beneficial for team performance. Members who value collaboration are more likely to choose collective ways of working before individual task work. This will likely strengthen and develop teamwork processes.

There is, however, no support to date for the commonly held notion that teams benefit from being composed of members with *complementary* personality traits. A team with, for example, a mix of members where some are extroverted and others are introverted, doesn't perform better than a team with only introverted or only extroverted members. This popular idea that intuitively appeared realistic has proved not to be true, so organizations should not waste any resources on making team composition any more complicated than it is.

Complementary task-related competencies, on the other hand, are positively correlated with work group performance, while age and gender differences seem not to be. It is a good idea to compose a team with members who have different knowledge and skills. Organizations will do well to make thorough analyses of which competencies are needed for a team task and compose the team of members with complementary skills that meet the needs.

It is useful to know which personality traits and values predict teamwork performance when you are in the process of hiring members and composing the team. Once the team is composed and all the members are in place, this information is less helpful. Once the selection is done, the team will have to do its work with the members at hand and solve the problems that emerge together. Focusing on personality differences at this stage is counterproductive and could lead to negative consequences for the team and its members. Focusing on the team's goals and how members' different task-related competencies can contribute to those is productive.

Educate People for Group Participation Competence

Organizations that focus on educating and training people about the technical aspects of their jobs and about effective group participation will increase the likelihood that organizational groups will become high performance teams.

Most organizations do a reasonable job of choosing people with technical expertise and providing ongoing technical training to their employees. When it comes to facilitating the group participation of members or leaders, however,

organizations don't do so well. Most employees in large organizations have attended the obligatory half-day workshop on group dynamics, and many have attended leadership training or team development workshops. However, the quality and duration of these experiences vary widely.

Imagine providing computer training that was inaccurate or incomplete. Imagine giving technicians inexact information about turbine maintenance. Although this probably happens occasionally, organizations tend to be careful and conservative about technical training. Unfortunately, this is not the case with group or leadership training.

Organizations forget to ask training providers some very basic and important questions. These questions include the following:

- What is taught in this training?

- Is the content of the training based on solid research evidence?

- Can the trainer provide us with social science references that support the training content?

- Does the training work? Do people who attend this training actually perform better as group members or leaders?

All training providers should be able to answer the first three pretty well. Trainers should be aware of the body of literature that supports the content of the training they provide. Trainers should also be aware of literature that disagrees with their approach. If a trainer is unable to answer the first three questions, head for the hills.

With regard to the fourth question, we now know more about which types of training do have effects on members' and leaders' behaviors. We know, for example, that trainings that combine instruction, practice, and reflection have positive effects on participants' satisfaction, learning, and behavior, and also on organizational performance.

Avoid Unsubstantiated Team Development and Consultation Strategies

Because not all work groups manage to reach high levels of effectiveness and productivity on their own, efforts to develop intervention strategies that will assist groups in meeting goals and maximizing effectiveness have been underway for many years.

In recent years a number of meta-analyses have shown that several intervention methods do have an impact on groups' functioning and productivity.

Klein and colleagues (2009) studied the impact of four specific team-building interventions (goal setting, interpersonal relations, problem-solving, and role clarification) on teamwork and found that all four types of

intervention have a positive effect. Of the four types of intervention studied, it turned out that goal setting and role clarification had the strongest impact on team processes.

Tannenbaum and Cerasoli (2013) performed a meta-analysis of so-called debriefs. Debriefs are sessions in which teams look back at a recent work episode and discuss how they worked together. The goal of a debrief is to reflect, learn, and develop plans for improved teamwork, based on these learnings. The researchers found that work groups that go through regular debriefs are more effective than work groups that don't. According to this research, groups that regularly have debriefs perform on average 25% better compared with groups that don't.

Another example of research into the effects of team development is a meta-analysis by McEwan and colleagues (2017). The goal of their study was to establish whether team development interventions have an impact, and to clarify how interventions should be designed to have that impact. Their results show that team-building interventions do have an effect on team performance. They also show that interventions should be experience-based, which means they should engage members in active work from which they can learn something about the team's processes and how they can influence them in a positive direction. They also found that interventions should be designed in a way that allows members to improve team processes before work (analysis, goal setting, planning), during work (coordination, communication, support), and after work (feedback, reflection, evaluation).

Before choosing an intervention to improve group performance, organization members should ask the consultant the following questions:

- What are the underlying assumptions of the intervention? That is, how will the intervention change the dynamics of the group?

- Is the intervention based on solid research evidence?

- Can the consultant provide social science references that support the intervention content?

- Does the intervention work? Do work groups that participate in this type of intervention increase their effectiveness and productivity?

If the consultant cannot answer the first three questions or bases his or her response solely on personal experience, head for the hills. For the fourth question, there is a lot of information today about what works and what doesn't in the realm of group development interventions. We know, for example, that team development and team training should be experience-based (i.e., based on practical and active ways of learning as opposed to lectures or presentations to a passive audience of team members). Make sure you find out if the consultant is aware of these new developments.

Avoid Helping Groups Too Much

Many groups get too much help. They often have an array of helpers such as sponsors, coaches, leaders, trainers, and consultants. However, this help is not always *helpful*. Throughout this chapter, we have outlined the things groups really need to function and to get moving again when they get stuck. We have found no evidence in the literature that increasing the number of expert helpers who meet with the team on a regular basis has any positive effects.

When groups ask for help, they should get that help if it conforms to the guidelines outlined here. Too much help often increases group dependence on experts and reduces the chances that group members will learn to be effective and productive on their own.

We mentioned this earlier, but we reiterate it here because it is so important: Groups need accurate and frequent feedback about their performance so they can learn to help themselves. Without feedback, it is very difficult for groups to judge their progress or make corrections to get back on course.

Make Sure Each Group Has Enough Autonomy to Do Its Work but Remains Connected With the Rest of the Organization

The mission of every group should be clear to other groups and individuals in the organization. If organization members and units are expected to help each other, they must know what others are doing.

Groups also need sufficient autonomy to do their work. They need to be clear about what decisions they can make on their own and what decisions must be reviewed by others. At the same time, groups must stay in close contact with other organizational members and groups. If an isolated group makes a decision without involving others, the odds of having that decision countermanded or ignored increase significantly. Groups must stay in close contact with others in the organization, because good working relationships with other organization members and groups are important indicators of an effective team.

Conduct Organizational Support Reviews Regularly

Many of the guidelines outlined in this chapter could be read as things that only upper management can accomplish. It is not our intention to imply that. Every member of the organization has a role to play in the success of the groups with which she or he interacts. Each group has a responsibility to solicit the things necessary for its success as well.

Before and during the life of any group, it would be helpful to review these guidelines. Group members or potential members, along with others who interact with the group in some meaningful way, should conduct these reviews to determine the group's level of organizational support and to make changes as needed. Periodic review sessions focused on organizational support, not group performance, will have at least two effects. First, problems with the level of organizational support can be identified and corrected early. Second, group members will be encouraged by the efforts of others to ensure that the group becomes a high performance team.

Organizational support review sessions have not been researched. However, because research has outlined a number of organizational factors that increase the chances of group success, it is only logical that organization members should use such review sessions to ensure that these factors are being addressed.

The following checklist is provided to help people participating in an organizational support review session evaluate the level of organizational support for a particular group. Work group members should complete the checklist anonymously before the meeting. Ensuring individual anonymity is crucial to the success of this process. Individuals must feel free to be candid in their responses.

A summary should be prepared before the meeting. At the meeting, participants should discuss the summary and identify areas where organizational support is adequate or superior and that need improvement. Action steps should be outlined as well. Although there will be areas where, for legitimate reasons, support cannot be provided at ideal levels, both the work group and the organization of which it is a part should aim to do the best they can.

The Organizational Support Checklist

Please read the statements below. Circle the number that most accurately describes your response to the statement. Use the following key to respond to each statement.

1 disagree strongly
2 disagree to some extent
3 agree to some extent
4 agree strongly
Section I
1. This organization supports innovation.
1   2   3   4

(*Continued*)

Maximum score: 128

Minimum score: 32

My score: _____

What is the overall level of organizational support?

Total Score	Organization's Grade
115+	A
103–114	B
89–102	C

What are the section scores?

Section I: Organizational Culture

Total Score	Organization's Grade
18+	A
16–17	B
14–15	C

Section II: Mission Clarity

Total Score	Organization's Grade
14+	A
12–13	B
10–11	C

Section III: Task and Technology

Total Score	Organization's Grade
18+	A
16–17	B
14–15	C

Section IV: Autonomy and Access

Total Score	Organization's Grade
14+	A
12–13	B
10–11	C

Section V: Feedback and Recognition

Total Score	Organization's Grade
11+	A
9–10	B
7–8	C

Section VI: Training and Development

Total Score	Organization's Grade
22+	A
19–21	B
16–18	C

Section VII: Training Quality

Total Score	Organization's Grade
14+	A
12–13	B
10–11	C

Before and during the life of any group, it would be helpful to review these guidelines. Group members or potential members, along with others who interact with the group in some meaningful way, should conduct these reviews to determine the group's level of organizational support and to make changes as needed. Periodic review sessions focused on organizational support, not group performance, will have at least two effects. First, problems with the level of organizational support can be identified and corrected early. Second, group members will be encouraged by the efforts of others to ensure that the group becomes a high performance team.

Organizational support review sessions have not been researched. However, because research has outlined a number of organizational factors that increase the chances of group success, it is only logical that organization members should use such review sessions to ensure that these factors are being addressed.

The following checklist is provided to help people participating in an organizational support review session evaluate the level of organizational support for a particular group. Work group members should complete the checklist anonymously before the meeting. Ensuring individual anonymity is crucial to the success of this process. Individuals must feel free to be candid in their responses.

A summary should be prepared before the meeting. At the meeting, participants should discuss the summary and identify areas where organizational support is adequate or superior and areas that need improvement. Action steps should be outlined as well. Although there will be areas where, for legitimate reasons, support cannot be provided at ideal levels, both the work group and the organization of which it is a part should aim to do the best they can.

The Organizational Support Checklist

Please read the statements below. Circle the number that most accurately describes your response to the statement. Use the following key to respond to each statement.

1 disagree strongly
2 disagree to some extent
3 agree to some extent
4 agree strongly
Section I
1. This organization supports innovation.
1   2   3   4

(*Continued*)

(Continued)

2. This organization expects to be successful.			
1	2	3	4
3. This organization values superior quality in all work endeavors.			
1	2	3	4
4. Organization members pay attention to detail.			
1	2	3	4
5. This organization values team recommendations.			
1	2	3	4

Section I score: _____

Section II

6. This organization has a clearly defined organizational mission.

    1   2   3   4

7. This organization has clear expectations about the quality of our group's output.

    1   2   3   4

8. This organization has clear expectations for our group's timing and deadlines.

    1   2   3   4

9. Our group's goals are clear to the rest of the organization.

    1   2   3   4

Section II score: _____

Section III

10. The goals and tasks of our group are meaningful.

    1   2   3   4

11. Our group's tasks are interesting to group members.

    1   2   3   4

12. Our group's tasks require group members to work collaboratively.

    1   2   3   4

13. Our group's tasks require continuous learning.

        1   2   3   4

14. Our group has been provided with members with appropriate technical skills.

        1   2   3   4

Section III score: _____

Section IV

15. Our group has access to the technical resources necessary to accomplish its tasks.

        1   2   3   4

16. Our group has access to the human resources necessary to accomplish its tasks.

        1   2   3   4

17. Our group has a defined work area.

        1   2   3   4

18. Our group has sufficient autonomy to do its work.

        1   2   3   4

19. Our group is in close communication with appropriate organizational members and groups.

        1   2   3   4

Section IV score: _____

Section V

20. Our group receives regular feedback about its performance and progress.

        1   2   3   4

21. Our group receives positive recognition for group achievements.

        1   2   3   4

22. Rewards and recognition are based on group achievements.

        1   2   3   4

Section V score: _____

(*Continued*)

(Continued)

Section VI

23. Our group has been provided with members with skills in the area of group participation.

       1   2   3   4

24. Our group has been provided with a leader with skills in the area of group management and participation.

       1   2   3   4

25. Our group has been provided with all technical training necessary for group success.

       1   2   3   4

26. Our group has been provided with appropriate team training.

       1   2   3   4

27. Our group leader has been provided with appropriate leadership training.

       1   2   3   4

28. Our group has been provided with the help of consultants when it has been deemed necessary for group success.

       1   2   3   4

Section VI score: _____

Section VII

If group training has been provided to your group, please answer the following questions:

29. I learned what I needed to know to work successfully with this group.

       1   2   3   4

30. I felt that the trainer was competent.

       1   2   3   4

If group consultation has been provided to your group, please answer the following questions:

31. The consultation helped the group members work more effectively together.

       1   2   3   4

32. I felt that the consultant was competent.

       1   2   3   4

Section VII score: _____

Maximum score: 128

Minimum score: 32

My score: _____

What is the overall level of organizational support?

Total Score	Organization's Grade
115+	A
103–114	B
89–102	C

What are the section scores?

Section I: Organizational Culture

Total Score	Organization's Grade
18+	A
16–17	B
14–15	C

Section II: Mission Clarity

Total Score	Organization's Grade
14+	A
12–13	B
10–11	C

Section III: Task and Technology

Total Score	Organization's Grade
18+	A
16–17	B
14–15	C

Section IV: Autonomy and Access

Total Score	Organization's Grade
14+	A
12–13	B
10–11	C

Section V: Feedback and Recognition

Total Score	Organization's Grade
11+	A
9–10	B
7–8	C

Section VI: Training and Development

Total Score	Organization's Grade
22+	A
19–21	B
16–18	C

Section VII: Training Quality

Total Score	Organization's Grade
14+	A
12–13	B
10–11	C