PAPER
27

Functions of team building

Bob Dick (1996) The 7 functions of team building. [1]
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Introduction

It is conventional to bemoan the gap between theory and practice. But perhaps our definition of theory is one which only poorly fits practice. I shall attempt to demonstrate in this paper that more general theories can be related directly and easily to practice, to the enrichment of both. I shall use team building as the focus of the analysis, and the vehicle for demonstrating the relationship that can exist between theory and practice.

1. First presented with the title “The functions of team building and how to achieve them” at a team building symposium held as part of the 1986 Australian Psychological Society Annual Conference, *Bridging the gap between theory, research and practice*, James Cook University of North Queensland, Townsville, August 1986, and subsequently revised.

First, to set the context. I take it that the human resources function is concerned with the match between a person and the organisation or other system which is the person's environment. Team building is an intervention which addresses the match between person and social environment. It deals with the relationship between person and person, and between person and team. It intends to be mutually beneficial to person and system. [2]

In this paper it is my hope to demonstrate that team building has a number of functions. I attempt to do so by analysing the nature and needs of person and of system.

I shall argue that people pursue need satisfaction. For the most part, systems exist to provide coordination. From this the goals of team building may be deduced. They are to provide the coordination required by the system in such a way that the individuals' needs are satisfied.

I shall conclude that four key functions of team building emerge from this analysis:

- identification of individual with individual;
- identification of individual with system;
- coordination between individual and individual;
- coordination of team with system.

To these can be added another three.

- removal of the perception of interpersonal threat;
- legitimising and enabling the expression of individual preferences;
- development of the necessary process skills.

2. I use the term "system" in preference to "organisation" as the argument seems to me to apply equally to situations which we would not typically describe as "organisational". Although the description in this paper is mostly given in terms which imply an industrial or commercial organisation, it can be used with little modification in other settings.

Each of these functions can be identified somewhere within current team building practice. The functions provide a convenient way of choosing methods which fit the particular situation. They also allow the development of a taxonomy of team building interventions.

Before I can proceed to an examination of team building a different issue has to be addressed — the nature of theory. I think the history of psychology exemplifies well enough the difficulty of relating theory to practice. It seems to me that this is partly because the type of theory addressed most easily by research differs from the theories most useful to practitioners. Using one label for two somewhat different concepts has produced confusion. A theory of theories is needed to deal with this.

A theory of theories

I do not want to take the time to argue this notion fully here. I have begun to develop it elsewhere [3] and will content myself with a brief summary. The core of the argument is as follows.

Theories differ on a number of dimensions. One important one is that of generality versus specificity. [4] The dimension can be recognised most easily by considering its extremes. At the specific pole of the dimension lie theories which are little more than summations of observations. At the other pole reside those theories that have more of the quality of logics than of the theories which are the usual subject of laboratory test.

3. I am developing this argument in an unpublished draft paper *Maslow revis(it)ed: An examination and reformulation of Maslow's hierarchy of needs*. St. Lucia: Department of Psychology, University of Queensland, 1984 (mimeo).
4. This is virtually the same dimension as the one identifiable in Churchman's notion of "fact net". At the base of the fact net are observations. One level above, generalisations from those observations are to be found. Generalisations of generalisations inhabit the third level. And so on. See C. West Churchman (1971), *The design of enquiring systems: basic concepts of systems and organizations*, New York: Basic Books.

Specific theories are capable of rigorous test and easy replicability. This is often at the cost of breadth of application. The subject of much of the experimental literature, they might be labled micro-theories.

General theories are more favoured by practitioners. They must have a wide enough boundary of application to fit a constantly changing situation. On the specific-general continuum they reside just beneath the logics such as algebras or geometries. They resemble logics in at least two respects. Firstly, they are capable of being fitted to a variety of situations. Secondly, it often makes little sense to ask if they are correct. More useful questions to ask about them are, "Are they logically consistent?", and "Does this situation lie within their boundary of application?".

The nearer to the logics they are, the less testable they are likely to be. The more likely their concepts are to be circularly defined. As an example, within systems theory the concepts *system*, *boundary*, and *environment* are defined in terms of each other.

To say this differently, the theories tested in much laboratory research are micro-theories. The theories addressed within action research are inherently less capable of crucial test. (This is quite independent of the difficulties of obtaining rigour in field research.) Hypothetico-deductive research and action research test different types of theories. To relate specific theories and general theories to each other requires a different type of analysis, and one which is rare in psychology.

In the remainder of this paper, the theories to which I refer will be macro-theories or logics. With this established, a second issue may be addressed: the function of such systems as organisations and families.

The function of systems

Social systems like organisations and clubs and families serve a variety of purposes. Their task function, however, is a very basic one. Systems allow individuals to achieve tasks which are too large or too complex for individuals to accomplish them unaided.

Social systems allow this accomplishment of tasks by coordinating the effort and expertise of individuals. They allow several individuals to pool their effort or their special expertise towards a combined goal.

It is not enough that individuals work on a common task. If they work as individuals with no concern for what others are doing they may well interfere with one another's performance. To achieve their task function, social systems must *coordinate*. The difference between unorganised and organised individuals lies in the extent to which the resources they consume, and the outcomes they produce, are coordinated.

For people to pool their effort and expertise there must be a traffic flow of materials and information and services between person and person. This traffic flow is enabled by and controlled by the system. It is the life-blood of the system. Without it the system cannot fulfil its reason for existence.

Team building can improve this crucial traffic flow in a number of ways. I will shortly analyse the traffic flow and the conditions which affect it. In this way I hope to demonstrate the key functions of team building.

System requirements

I have argued that, above all, the system exists to provide the coordination which permits joint effort. Anything which better coordinates the traffic flow is therefore in the system's interests.

From the system's point of view, the flow of materials and information and services must fulfil two conditions ...

- The materials and information must be available when and where they are needed for the achievement of individual or team goals.
- They must also be relevant to wider system goals.

The first of these functions is achieved by clarifying who requires what from whom. It is typically addressed by such techniques as role negotiation. The second may be achieved by some form of management by objectives which moves downward through the system. Within team building it may be achieved (or at least addressed) by careful use of goal setting.

It appears, then, that role negotiation may improve system coordination if done within a work team with attention to the goals of the wider system. The traffic flow within a work team provides the raw data for role negotiation. Goal setting is a mechanism which can be used to coordinate the efforts of one team with requirements elsewhere in the system.

The traffic flow itself may need further definition.

Traffic flow

The most obvious traffic flow takes the form of an exchange of materials and information and services between people. When this is to be incorporated directly into a person's tasks it might be called primary traffic flow.

Coordination itself requires further traffic. If the primary traffic flow were left to chance, the result might well resemble that of unorganised individual effort. A secondary traffic flow of coordinating information is an important element in determining system effectiveness. This is often overlooked.

Even more often overlooked are the psychological effects of the primary and secondary traffic. Every time a piece of material or information is exchanged there is the chance that the receiver will read some intended message into the way in which it is offered. The giver may infer some message in the way it is received. The satisfaction of individuals, and their identification with one another and with the system, may depend heavily on this.

Whatever method is chosen to improve the traffic and its flow, it is as well that attention is given to all three levels.

It is one thing to agree on system needs. It is another to achieve it; this depends on the willingness, for whatever reason, of the individuals who comprise the system.

Individual requirements

From the individual's point of view other people may be a cause of effort or discomfort. The traffic (in the sense described above) which allows one person to do her task is provided by others. This is at the cost to them of some effort. Understanding organisations requires an understanding of the reasons why people benefit others at cost to themselves.

Apart from altruistic behaviour, one would expect that there are countervailing benefits. The concept of identification can help in providing an explanation. Under some conditions people identify with each other. They may then feel each other's pain or pleasure. To benefit someone with whom one identifies is to experience pleasure. To hurt someone with whom one identifies is to hurt oneself.

It is when two people identify with each other that they are most likely to wish to benefit each other.

You have probably noticed an obvious objection to this point of view. It is often in the closest relationships that people often seem to display the greatest capacity to hurt each other. Yet it is here that identification is presumably high.

The reason is to be found in our reaction to threat with fight or flight. It is often those closest to us who best know our vulnerabilities. They are most easily able to injure us. In the normal course of events they often constitute the gravest threat. At the same time we represent a potential threat to them. The injury, I presume, comes about because of the threat and despite the identification.

This, too, has implications for team building. If people experience each other as a threat this may overcome the beneficial effect of other interventions. I will return to it later.

Two people who identify with each other can be expected to improve their teamwork. It is no guarantee that they will devote their efforts to the benefit of the wider system. This is more likely to occur if they identify with their team as a whole and with the surrounding system.

Identification has two components. One is individual and the other is collective. In this it resembles coordination. Relationship oriented team building addresses the first of these functions. Certain types of goal setting, among other interventions, address the second.

The functions of team building

Four key functions of team building have so far been identified. In summary, role negotiation most clearly allows the traffic flow to be coordinated between individual and individual. Relationship oriented team building focusses on the identification of individual with individual. Those types of goal setting which create some shared vision amongst people may address the collective functions.

To these can be added the possible fifth function of removing people's experience of threat from within the team. (This, too, could be subdivided into individual and collective functions; but it is not a necessary elaboration.) Some approach which deals with people's perceptions of one another may be indicated to deal with this. Although it is not usually included as a formal part of team building it is often arises naturally as part of relationship-oriented team building.

Individual differences

So far, so good. The functions already addressed, however, assume that people are for the most part interchangeable. It is obvious that each person brings unique needs and preferences and skills into the work setting. In an organisational setting the skills may be taken into account during the process of selection or promotion. The needs and preferences are often ignored.

Assume for the moment that the differences between people are sometimes substantial. On such occasions an exchange of duties might lead to greater satisfaction, and perhaps greater performance, for both.

It is common enough for public, industrial and commercial organisations to take the skills of people into account when tasks are first allocated or people are first appointed. The judgment tends to be based on qualifications, previous work history, and performance at interview. In the day-to-day running of an organisation, however, skills are not given much attention except when promotions are being considered. Preferences are given almost no attention except through self-selection. And while people are more likely to apply for those jobs they expect to enjoy, there may well be other influences on their choice.

Preferences may be taken into account during role negotiation. The requests people make of each other are likely to be based partly on what they expect to enjoy. This may be limited to some extent because in many settings people may not regard their personal preferences as a legitimate concern. They may also lack a terminology within which preferences are easily expressed. If preferences can be expressed and taken into account, greater satisfaction may result.

A possible sixth function of team building is therefore to legitimise and enable the expression of individual preferences.

All of this assumes that the chosen process will work. Rather than leave this to chance one might add a seventh function — helping team members to develop process skills.

Process skills

A robust enough process in the hands of a skilled consultant may be sufficient guarantee that the process works well. Team building is likely to be most effective, however, when it can be used as required on a day-to-day basis by team members. Even with robust processes some demand is made on the skills of team members. The more skilled they are in such matters the more effectively they will be able to express themselves and understand one another.

To work, any process must bring about an interchange of information. Each team member has certain information to convey to colleagues. This may include information about preferences, goals and requirements. For this information to be used it must be understood. The key skills are therefore those of giving and understanding information: in other words, communication skills.

To illustrate the seven functions I now describe one approach to team building which can fulfill all of them. As this approach has been described in detail in a number of documents [5] the description below is in the form of an outline only.

5. The approach I describe here is the one I am most familiar with. It is one I have described in a number of documents, most particularly: *Team building: Face-to-face communication and some procedures for improving it*. (Monograph) Brisbane: Institution of Engineers, June, 1977; Conflict resolution skills and techniques in management development, Part 1, *Management Development Journal*, 1983, 2(3), 42-54; Part 2, *Management Development Journal*, 1983, 2(4), 15-31; and *The management of conflict*. In Proceedings, Seminar '83, Melbourne OD Network, Melbourne, 1983 (Abstract, 1985). To this I have added the results of some recent use I have made of such instruments as the MBTI and Belbin's team roles questionnaire. Part of the material was developed in joint consulting assignments, some with Stephen Moss, some with Tim Dalmau.

An approach to team building

A typical intervention is defined below is step-by-step form. At each step the functions addressed are identified.

1. The consultant clarifies her [6] role.

Negotiate, if necessary, with those who have power of veto over the team's operation. This is to establish the boundaries within which the team or group may make decisions. Then negotiate your role with the team.

You may also talk to team members (and perhaps other people which whom they interact) to diagnose the likely issues. This may be done with individuals or with the team as a whole.

This first step does not address any of the functions directly. It legitimises your involvement. In clarifying your role it encourages team members to reflect on the issues and to begin to take responsibility for their own coordination and satisfaction.

2. Goals and constraints are identified.

Use some form of goal-setting to determine team goals. Check that these goals are consistent with the goals and constraints nominated at the previous step.

My own preference is to use *search* [7] as the goal setting technique. By identifying what might be called a shared vision it contributes to a collective identity. It allows people from outside the team to be involved; this helps to ensure that wider issues are taken into account.

6. Faced with a choice in use between male pronouns and circumlocutions such as "him or her" I have instead chosen to use female pronouns throughout.
7. Search is a participative goal setting technique developed at the Centre for Continuing Education at Australian National University. It is described in M. Emery (1976), *Searching: for new directions, in new ways, for new times*, Australian National University, Centre for Continuing Education, Canberra. I have prepared a detailed workbook primarily for one-day search-based planning in community settings, *Search*, Interchange, Chapel Hill, 1986.

In community settings, needs and resources surveys may be used to serve these purposes. These too may be done within a framework based on search.

This serves twin purposes. It establishes a collective identity with which individuals can identify. It specifies the goals to which the larger system wishes the team to work, and the constraints within which that is to occur.

3. Sensitise team members to their preferences.

Use some measure of personal preference to sensitise team members to these issues and to their similarities and differences.

Jung's personality typology [8] serves this purpose well. Although it has been less than popular in academic psychology it has a strong impact on individuals if used skilfully. As it is in a sense a theory of decision-making style [9] it is relevant to a wide range of human behaviour.

A number of instruments are available for this purpose. The best developed of them is probably the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). [10] This is also supported by readable and informative literature. [11] Alternatively, there are some self-scored tests, of which the most common is probably the *Personal style inventory*. [12]

One difficulty with Jung's theories is that they do not always translate easily into plans for change, particularly not in an organisational context. I have experimented with Belbin's *Team roles questionnaire* (TRQ) [13] but find it does not have as much impact as the MBTI. In recent times I have therefore used

8. Jung (1921), *Psychological types* (trans. HG Baynes, revised R. Hull), Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1974.
9. I am developing this argument elsewhere. See my draft document *Styles of decision making* (in preparation).
10. K.C. Briggs and I.B. Myers (1977), *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*, Consulting Psychologists Press, Palo Alto.
11. For example, I.B. Myers with P.B. Myers (1980), *Gifts differing*, Consulting Psychologists Press, Palo Alto.
12. R.C. Hogan and D.W. Champagne (1980), The personal style inventory, in J. Pfeiffer and J.W. Jones, *The annual handbook for group facilitators*, University Associates, California.
13. T.M. Belbin (1981), *Management teams: why they succeed or fail*. Heinemann, London.

both of them: first the MBTI for its impact, followed by the TRQ for its relevance and practicality.

This addresses the sixth function of legitimising a concern for individual preferences. It provides team members with a language which enables their preferences to be expressed. It also serves some minor purposes. It increases team members' identification with one another. It helps to identify some work skills which are related to better management of interdependencies between people. By identifying the individual differences which underlie much behaviour it often resolves misinterpretations which people have about one another, and thus reduces threat.

4. Key interdependencies are defined.

Team members identify the strength of the interdependencies within the team. They decide which members of the team have the most need to renegotiate their work relationships.

One way of collecting this information is to ask team members to answer these four questions.

- If you were absent, and your place were taken by someone not yet capable of doing your job, who would be most affected ...
    - in the short term?
    - in the long term?
- If someone else in the team were absent and replaced by someone unable to do their job well, in whose case would you be most affected ...
    - in the short term?
    - in the long term?

When pooled, this provides information which enables team members to decide which interdependencies are strongest.

This is preparation for the function of defining person-person interdependencies. It also allows the team to make decisions about the role negotiations to follow. This increases the likelihood that individual decisions will remain consistent with team goals and between-team interdependencies.

5. Team members learn to use the role negotiation procedure.

The consultant runs brief teaching sessions on the role negotiation procedure, and on communication skills. Teach team members how to act as third parties to their team colleagues.

This equips team members with the necessary process skills — the seventh function. It also increases the likelihood that the processes will continue to be used as needed after the consultant has completed the present assignment.

6. Roles are negotiated.

In meetings for two and three, roles are renegotiated. I use a conflict resolution procedure which suits well a one-on-one role negotiation. In the early negotiations I myself act as third party. In later sessions the team members taking part in the negotiation choose their own third party from their colleagues.

There are two main parts to the procedure.

- Firstly, to identify the interdependencies in more detail, each team member analyses her responsibilities by converting them into statements of inputs and outputs. (I have found that not all people can identify inputs and outputs directly. They seem able to identify responsibilities. Having done so, they are usually able to convert these to inputs and outputs and outputs quite readily.)

  At this point attention can be given to all three levels of interdependencies: the primary traffic flow for direct incorporation in the task; the secondary traffic flow of coordinating information; the tertiary traffic flow which consists of the psychological effects of the primary and secondary traffic.

- Secondly, this information is exchanged within a role negotiation procedure. The procedure extends itself readily into a conventional relationship-oriented team building session for two as needed. It can also be extended further to address they types of information which Argyris and

Schön [14] have reported as a major cause of poor relationships between people.

- Initially, information is exchanged about one person's actions, the material consequences for the other person, and that person's reaction.

  actions → consequences → actions

- On any occasion when it becomes apparent that either person is upset, information about feelings is added to this.

  actions → consequences → feelings → actions

  It is at this point that it resembles relationship-oriented team building.

- If the feelings have a history, information about beliefs is added. Beliefs about each other's motives are usually the most relevant.

  actions → consequences → beliefs → feelings → actions

  In helping to surface hidden agendas, this stage resembles the techniques of Argyris and Schon.

By limiting these meeting to two team members issues are dealt with in a more time-efficient manner. Having learned that issues can be resolved by those affected, team members are then also more likely to continue to use the procedures after the consultant has withdrawn.

This is a key part of the procedure. In its simplest form, this serves the third function of improving coordination between individual and individual. Extended to include information about feelings it further strengthens individual-individual identification. This is the first function. Further extended to cover hidden agendas it addresses the fifth function by removing perceptions of threat.

14. C. Argyris and D.A. Schon (1974), *Theory in practice: increasing professional effectiveness.* Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

7. Results are reported to the whole team.

The results of this negotiation are reported back to the whole team for ratification. This helps to keep team members honest. It also provides a check that overall team goals are met and that other people are not adversely affected.

From this point on the procedure may alternate between whole-team meetings which decide who has to negotiate about what issues, and meetings for two or three where the actual negotiation takes place.

This step helps to reinforce coordination of the team with the system, and also to maintain individual-team identification.

The same set of functions can be used as a taxonomy. As such, it is helpful in the early stages of a team-building intervention. It can help a consultant or team member decide what aspects of team building may usefully be included in the intervention.

It will be apparent, I think, that any one of the assertions I have made in this paper could consume a lifetime of empirical research. Theorists and empiricists are not agreed on the nature of humankind, or the nature of systems. At this level of analysis, therefore, I have not treated it as an empirical issue. I have analysed the issues and their context conceptually.

The empiricism then emerges in the form of action research. Having chosen a taxonomy and an approach to team building, I use them in practice. Any one team building intervention works to some extent. In the light of that experience I can revise the taxonomy and the process.

To revert to the point at which I began ... A taxonomy is almost at the level of a logic. While not capable of crucial test, it does yield predictions about what form and components of team building are likely to fit what situation. It can be modified in the light of experience.