

Harness Potential

The Systematic Manager - Issue 8 (An Exploration)

How well are the skills and competences of your people harnessed into adding real value for the business? How well does your team selection and management process ensure that people are harnessed and developed to the full?

The following is not in any way intended (or purporting) to be a definitive statement on the topic- but merely a ramble through some of the thinking that exists in this area, and perhaps a stimulus for further debate.

In the previous topic, we looked at how tasks, problems, issues, etc. could be tackled in a way that not only generated a solution, but also generated increased competence in the organisation's people. The ideal would be that there was as much planning put into 'how to use tasks to develop people' as there is put into 'how to use people to deliver tasks'.

There are two big problems to this however (apart from the planning time required). The first is that if you are stretching someone, you have increased the chances that mistakes will be made (especially since this is the main means of learning) and the second is, that most formal structures are not flexible enough to either permit such growth, or to make full use of it.

In this brief exploration we will address precisely these two issues, by:

- Looking at flexible structures, and why they are so important
- Looking at the role of teamwork in ensuring the quality of the end result
- Exploring how teamwork needs to develop if the full benefits are to be attained
- Pulling it all together

Progress is not Position

In a formalised hierarchical structure, the nature of each job is well defined, and so is the skill set necessary to effect it. People can therefore only grow from the skill set required for one job, by moving to another job. Added to which, the potential for growth within each job is necessarily limited because the job needs certain tasks to be done with a minimum level of quality, and therefore anybody moving into the job needs to operate with a competence level to meet that immediately upon (or very shortly thereafter) taking up the role.

The formalised structure has been with us for many years, and was developed at a time when the competence of people was not as valued as it is now. It comes from a time when change was fairly slow, and tasks tended to be routine. But now change is rapid, and competitive edge lies in the capability of people and the availability of knowledge, rather than in land or capital as it used to ('The Living Company' by Arie de Geuss has useful input on this). As such, structures that value capital over competence are no longer the most competitively advantageous. So, why are they so popular? I think the answer to that is reflected by a recent quote which I heard: "The people who have spent twenty years climbing up a ladder are usually the least likely to kick it out from under themselves"

But for as long as progress is determined by your influence/control over assets, through the hierarchical structure, your best people will continue to learn at a slower pace, and seek roles that do not necessarily use them to best advantage.

The alternative is to develop a value system which positions people according to their competence and their potential for the organisation, and which allows them to develop and deliver that competence in a way that best suits them and the organisation. It is likely to be an entirely more fluid arrangement based on projects and team membership, and it is already happening in many forward thinking organisations such as Microsoft and BP. It is perhaps more akin to the portfolio lifestyle reflected in Charles Handy's book: 'The empty raincoat'

The growth in knowledge systems and intranets will almost certainly facilitate and accelerate this change, because people's competence will become more visible than their hierarchical position, and it will become more easy to plan development paths, and to value the results.

Improving Performance Through Teams

As has been said earlier, if people are constantly learning, they are constantly failing – since this is an essential prerequisite. Key to any system that can tolerate this, is the ability to pick up and address any such failures rapidly and effectively. The recognition of errors must be swift, and those errors need to be addressed well before they create any damage. Ideally the errors will have a productive impact on learning without any side-effects on performance.

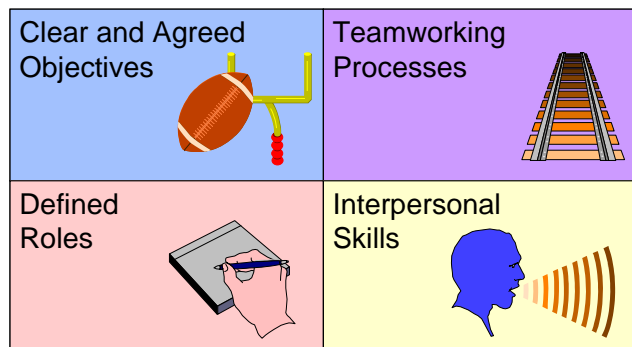
Teams provide a basis for such a system. Within teams, people can work together to learn from each other, coaching arrangements can develop, and people can seek support and feedback from each other easily and quickly.

And the flexibility within teams enables us to develop whatever skills we need in anybody who needs them, whether those skills are technical, experiential, communication, coaching, process, or leadership. People can develop and stretch their technical and content experience, through exercising new process skills, while learning how to play different team roles, and while others learn how to coach and lead them.

Teamwork Processes and Roles

The above concept places a far greater expectation on teamwork than has previously been the case in most organisations. At one level they have to replace and compensate for a lot of the support and discipline features that are available in the formal structure. At another, they need to provide coherence within chaos, to compensate for the steadiness of direction inherent in the hierarchy.

The team processes therefore become all the more crucial to managing the increased risks and ensuring that all of the potential is harnessed. The essentials of teamwork, shown right, are key to ensuring that the team has a contract to work with each other and on each other:



- The objectives of everyone in the team must be such that the team knows it has to work together and develop each other to achieve them. The team, and the real success of everyone in it, stands or falls by how they work together
- The processes of the team provide the means for ensuring the continuity of learning in the organisation. Each team must use the knowledge and experience of past teams to efficiently guarantee success. And through these processes each individual grows in competence to join other teams tackling more onerous issues through the same process library.
- Defined roles provide the means for determining what each individual will put in and develop during the time of their association with the project. But the roles can be far more subtle and effective than simply leader, facilitator, and various specialists. Apart from those roles there is plenty of opportunity to develop a range of other skills at a range of different levels, and against a background of a range of different types of project: Leadership; sub-leadership; administration; research; facilitation; coaching; mentoring; communication; integration; networking; influencing; project managing; appraisal; feedback; goal setting; planning; delegating; reporting; observing; selling; reviewing; auditing; counselling; disciplining; consensus gaining; vision building; liasing – with different levels of competency in each.
- Interpersonal skills then, provides the means for your organisation to develop its own protocols such that everybody gets the best out of everybody else: sharing; inspiring; challenging; teaching; listening; asserting; communicating; bonding etc.

Pulling it all Together

But using teamwork to 'Harness Potential' should not in any way be seen as a soft option. The use of teams is not an excuse to abandon discipline, but a challenge to find new and more productive forms of it.

Simply setting up teams and imagining they will somehow magically work out is not what is being advocated here. Instead, the challenge becomes harder:

- Who do you put with which project to get the best for both?
- How do you balance technical, process, organisational, and interpersonal learning needs?
- How do you ensure that everybody has a coach to help them through the learning?
- What systems exist between the coach, the individual and the team to ensure that the learning does not result in failure?
- How does the learning of one team get transferred to the processes of another?

But the sophisticated nature of IT provides an excellent solution to many of these questions. IT can be used to track an individual's growth and competence, and to present their suitability for projects; IT can be used to collate the process learning and to make it available to other teams; IT can be used to monitor project progress and ensure issues are addressed early on.

But even so, the whole concept of 'Harness Potential' is dependant on management feeling that it is important enough to plan and wrestle with to develop a balanced solution.