GOVERNANCE OF TEAM INTERACTION: USING CHARTERS TO FACILITATE SUCCESS

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ABSTRACT

Teams have become a foundational unit of work to perform business tasks. Unfortunately, many teams start out lacking clear guidelines for intra-team interaction, which can result in inefficiencies and reduced team member satisfaction. This paper examines characteristics of team charters through qualitative research methodology. The research delivers a general template for a team charter that can be used by teams to establish policies and procedures for team interaction.

TEAM CHARTERS

The purpose of this investigative study is to identify characteristics of team charters through exploratory qualitative research. George and Wilson (1997) and McIntosh-Fletcher (1996) frame team purpose in terms of charter. A charter is a formal document, accessible to the team. The key elements are purpose, responsibilities, completion, boundaries, ground rules, and meetings. The charter is intended to clarify roles, purpose, and keep the team focused on its purpose.

Teams are an important workplace issue [4] [10] . Many companies are organizing their business operations using work teams as an important mechanism for coping with complex and changing environments [11]. Many scholars and practitioners consider the establishment and enactment of team values to be absolutely critical to the team's success and team member satisfaction. Values have been referred to as the "silent power" of organizational life [19]. Values are defined as "the shared goals, beliefs, ideals, and purposes of the group" [14, p. 25]. "Values are enduring beliefs that a specific kind of conduct or particular state of existence is personally or socially preferable. They define the organization, prescribe its purposes, and provide the basis for measures of success" [5, p. 4-15]. Values can be consciously chosen and clearly articulated direction for the organization. In addition, they often incorporate the talents and abilities of team members. They contribute to the super ordinate goals of the organization and lead stakeholders to a sense of fulfillment [2].

A team's primary belief is related to its reason for existence. There must be a reason for the team to exist. D. W. Johnson and F. P. Johnson (1991) stated that teams exist for a reason. Individuals join teams to achieve goals they cannot accomplish alone. Larson and LaFasto's (1989) research determined what makes teams of all kinds successful. Only one requirement became clear: High performance teams must have a clear understanding of their goal and the belief that the goal is a worthwhile or important result [15]. To be effective, goals must be clear. Goal ambiguity results in high levels of tension, joking, tangents, horseplay, and a failure to support good ideas. For individuals to perform well within a team, they must know what the team goals are and understand what actions need to be taken and when to attain them. They must also know the criteria the team will use to measure attainment and have an awareness of how their behavior contributes to the team.

Norms are the standards shared by members of the team. They are expectations for the team as a unit. Norms define standards for acceptable behavior [12]. Norms provide the basis for predicting behavior of team members and serve in guiding individual behavior. Norms promote conformity to facilitate effective team interaction, performance, and harmony [13]. Norms can be prescriptive (i.e., how members should act) and proscriptive (i.e., how members should not act) [1]. Norms are expected behaviors by members of a group; they are group decided codes of conduct. A norm is a standard to guide group behavior" [14, p. 25]. In summary, norms are pervasive ways of acting that are found in group interactions [22] and strongly influence member behavior [23].

THE STUDY

The primary research question of this qualitative study is: What aspects of team interaction should be addressed in a team charter?

Qualitative Research Process

This study of team member perspectives toward teams will necessarily have to deal with human qualities that are difficult to quantify. Therefore, a qualitative, naturalistic method of investigation will be utilized. A qualitative case study is a useful approach because it can deal effectively with the holistic nature of this investigation [9]. The researchers conducted this study with the goal of transferability to future studies. The results of this study establish a foundation for future empirical research related to team effectiveness. In order for this study to be transferable, or utilizable in other situations, the data collection and analysis must include thick descriptions [16] [6]. Dependability is related to the degree that this study could be replicated or repeated. The key to a dependable study according to Lincoln and Guba (1985) is the existence of an audit trail. An audit trail can be described as thorough documentation from the start of the study through to its completion. The researchers acknowledge that this study involves significant limitations related to research methodology. However, the results will assist the researchers in developing more rigorous empirical research and the themes that emerge from this study can help educators to improve student team pedagogy.

Data Source

The data sources for this study consist of focus group discussions and surveys. The respondents to this study are working, non-traditional students from a public baccalaureate institution of higher education located in the western region of the United States. After the data collected, the researchers began the analysis process. Qualitative data analysis is comprehensive and intuitive in nature. The primary activity in the analysis process is termed coding. The coding activity involves the assignment of descriptive terminology to the phrases, concepts, and words communicated by the interviewees. Many authors [3] [8] [18] [20] [21] state that coding is analysis and establishes the foundation for the interpretation of the data. The coding process is refined as themes and issues emerge from the analysis.

Summary of Findings

The analysis of data revealed themes related to team member beliefs about team interaction and how the interaction should be governed through a charter. The three primary themes are: purpose and goals, communication, and member responsibilities. Table 1 includes a summary of the findings.

Theme	Issue
Purpose and Goals	Reason for existence
	Measure(s) of success
	Timeline of activities
Communication	Identification of primary communication channels
	Guidelines for information sharing
	Guidelines for decision making
	Level of openness
	Reporting responsibilities
	Timeliness of communication
	Team/organization communication guidelines
Member Responsibilities	Assignment of key areas
	Assignment of tasks
	Accountability measures
	Expertise sharing

Table 1: Summary of Team Charter Elements

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