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SELF-MANAGING TEAMS

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Teams or work groups are a fundamental part of most organizations in manufacturing, service, and high technology companies and in nonprofit organizations. Teams are how work gets done. Some operate in a face-to-face format while others are geographically distributed. Some occur within an organization while others contain members from multiple organizations, in one or many countries. Self-managing teams (SMTs) share some common features of all groups: group goals, a set of interdependent tasks, and the challenge to coordinate the different tasks and skills to create a group product or service. What distinguishes SMTs is their control over the decision-making process. In traditional groups, managers decide who is in the group, what they do, how and when. In an SMT, many of these decisions are made by the group. This entry examines the ways in which SMTs differ from traditional teams, then examines impact on work outcomes, research directions, and limitations on use.

To understand the difference between traditional teams and SMTs, consider the example of a manufacturing facility that produced blades for jet engines. The plant was organized into SMTs, each representing a jet engine manufacturer (e.g., GE). Each SMT could decide who could join the group, what jobs people would work on, and how the jobs were to be done; they also disciplined members of the group, evaluated competencies learned for pay considerations, and so on. In an SMT operation, ancillary activities such as maintenance and quality control are part of the group's responsibilities as opposed to being independent support operations.

The fundamental idea is that the responsibility and authority for all the major work decisions are held by the team rather than some organizational hierarchy. This would be true in any work setting (e.g., manufacturing, service, non-profit). However, SMTs are not a unitary concept. There can be differences among SMTs. The major differences between SMTs are the scope and number of decisions the group controls. For example, if the group did not have the authority to discipline members or to have involvement in pay decisions, it would still be a SMT. The majority of work decisions need to be delegated to the team

Impact on Outcomes

How do these structural features of SMTs affect group and organizational effectiveness? Why redesign groups this way? What is the rationale? There are some key mediating mechanisms that account for SMT effectiveness. First, SMTs provide workers with greater levels of autonomy, responsibility, freedom, and variety—factors demonstrated in the literature to create higher levels of motivation. Second, there are demands for greater levels of coordination. The group members are responsible for making coordination effective rather than a supervisor, and they have control over their environment. In well-designed SMTs, there are high levels of cohesiveness and strong norms supporting cooperation. Third, given the groups' responsibility for managing the major production decisions, most SMTs exhibit high levels of problem solving. Instead of relying on a supervisor or others in the organization to solve a problem, the team takes responsibility. A fourth mediating mechanism, related to the three listed above, is a focus on learning. That is, the group wants to continuously develop new repertoires to enhance performance.

The potential consequences of these higher levels of motivation, coordination, problem

solving, and learning are SMTs that achieve high performance goals. Also, group members express high levels of satisfaction and commitment over time. Other indicators, such as lower absenteeism, turnover, and accidents would be associated with high performance teams.

There has been considerable empirical work on SMTs. What are the empirical findings about SMT? First, there is some limited evidence that SMTs improve performance. This occurs when SMTs are effectively implemented and institutionalized in the organizations. Performance is measured both objectively (e.g., productivity, quality) and subjectively. Higher customer satisfaction is another factor associated with SMTs. There is some evidence that withdrawal behavior (e.g., turnover, absenteeism, accidents) appear to be lower in SMTs.

A few recent studies examine some of the mediators. That is, the institution of SMTs leads to greater effort and problem solving, which in turn leads to greater performance. Another general finding is that greater levels of employee satisfaction and cohesion are found in SMTs.

All the above evidence focuses on an effectiveness paradigm. In the last decade, there have been shifts away from effectiveness studies to learning more about personality differences, leadership tactics, the role of conflict (i.e., intersender conflict, role ambiguity) in SMTs and emergent forms of control systems. There is not yet a cumulative body of evidence around these topics to permit identifying consistent findings.

Directions for Future Research

What are some of the challenges in making sense of this literature and providing direction for future research? First, and most important, the definitions of SMTs are not clear. Asserting a group is an SMT is common in the literature. But the definition of an SMT is based on the group's control over a variety of decisions. In many studies the specific decisions the groups do

or do not do are not well specified. Naming a group an SMT and structurally redesigning a group are two different things. This issue makes it very difficult to identify robust findings.

A second challenge in understanding SMTs is their evolution over time. When a group is given control over a whole new set of decisions, it is not surprising that there are initial effects. That is, the newly accepted authority and responsibility generates positive performance changes. The issue is how these groups evolve over time and whether the changes associated with the new team structure persists. That is why longitudinal designs are necessary.

A third issue deals with the use of control groups. These are absent in most of the studies on SMTs. To assess whether the structure of SMTs leads to changes in affect or performance, there needs to be a comparison group. A fourth issue is being clear about level of analysis for theory, measurement and analysis. SMTs represent group- level phenomena. This means that measurement and analysis need to be at the group level. A related issue concerns testing the theory, which links structural change to mediating mechanisms to effectiveness criteria. There are very few studies that examine this set of linkages.

Lastly, a majority of the studies on SMTs are done in real work organizations. That is a positive feature. The context is a major predictor of whether SMTs will be initiated or persist over time. Researchers need to be more careful in specifying how the specific organizational context affects the development and persistence of SMTs.

Limitations of SMTs

In the future, as long as groups remain a fundamental building block of work organizations, we would expect to see forms of SMTs in use. As reported above, they have emerged in different types of organizations and appear in numerous global work settings. At the same time, there are

the limiting factors on the diffusion and long-term effectiveness of SMTs.

First, SMTs represent a fundamental change in the organization. Authority, responsibility, control and decision-making systems are redesigned. These represent basic changes in organizational values, which are difficult to achieve. Unless these fundamental changes occur, SMTs cannot exist. Second, if SMTs are introduced into an organization, but traditional hierarchical teams also remain in place, there are likely to be conflicts among these different teams, and the long run viability of the SMTs would be in jeopardy. The conflict resides in the fundamental differences in the control and decision-making systems between the hierarchical and SMTs, which limits the ability of any type to coexist with the other.

Another limiting factor deals with task structure. SMTs are designed for situations with high task interdependence. If SMTs are introduced into a group where individuals primarily work alone (e.g., service technicians), SMTs do not work.

SMTs will remain part of the organizational landscape. There are at least thirty years of research on the benefits and cost of these forms of groups. At the same time, the nature of work is changing to be more distributed, global, and with a premium on knowledge work. One interesting challenge is how one can retain the basic desirable features of a SMT and at the same time adapt it to a changing work environment.

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See also: Job design, group cohesion, group decision making/problem solving, group learning, teams, team performance assessment, work teams

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