

---

# The truth about teams

---

*Kenneth J. Mussnug and  
Aaron W. Hughey*

---

## The authors

Kenneth J. Mussnug and Aaron W. Hughey are based in the Department of Educational Leadership, Western Kentucky University, Kentucky, USA.

---

## Abstract

Many companies have adopted self-directed work teams as a way to empower their employees and thus enhance both productivity and quality. Many of these same companies, however, have experienced a myriad difficulties and problems in attempting to implement a team programme. Explains how to determine if your company could benefit from using a team management approach, as well as how best to “set the stage” for an empowerment programme such as teams. Includes useful strategies for implementing teams, a discussion of the critical role of management, how long the transition can be expected to take, how to deal with issues of accountability, and the importance of initial and ongoing training. Addresses the concept of team efficacy in the context of why teams are successful at some companies and disastrous at others.

In the last decade, many companies adopted the team approach to management. Many others are interested in the concept and are seriously considering implementing team programmes. Indeed, there seems to be general agreement among many managers that inherent flaws in hierarchical systems of supervision are increasingly rendering such systems obsolete. The future will no doubt see far fewer levels between upper management and customers. A logical consequence of this phenomenon is the necessary empowerment of employees at virtually every level of the organization – empowerment which is typically facilitated via teams.

Contemporary society, however, seems to have an obsession with the “quick fix”. Few would disagree that there are many advantages associated with the convenience of fast-food restaurants and drive-through banking. Yet, where human performance is concerned, the quick-fix mentality can seldom be applied satisfactorily. Adopting a team supervisory strategy necessarily mandates a radical change in both manager and employee behaviours. But change does not occur quickly or easily for most people. Employees typically resist change, and more often than not, they are distrustful of management’s stated reason for making a change. Many employees view any new management idea as just another potential ploy to increase their workload without a corresponding increase in either compensation or appreciation. Making a corporate culture change as complex as the introduction of a team approach requires substantial forethought, careful planning and gradual, systematic execution. It requires ongoing and extensive communication. It requires persistent monitoring of employee feelings and reactions. The quick-fix mentality simply will not work where teams are concerned.

Not surprisingly, then, many managers are beginning to voice numerous complaints about empowerment programmes such as self-directed work teams. Florida Light and Power Company, for example, which won Japan’s prestigious Deming Prize for quality management, recently scaled back worker participation when employees complained that team meetings and problem-solving assignments were interfering with the “real” work for which they were being held accountable. At Saturn’s Spring Hill, Tennessee, facility, union leaders are said to be growing impatient with the company’s strict adherence

to the team approach and see it as an impairment to productivity.

Some of the problems associated with teams developed because companies adopted the concept for the wrong reasons. They introduced teams into their corporate culture in order to keep up with “Jones’s manufacturing” down the street, and/or they received a mandate from headquarters. Other companies developed and implemented team programmes without a clear understanding of what they were doing. Consequently, they lacked the conviction and dedication necessary to make the team approach work. In reality, the source of the motivation for teaming, in and of itself, is often not that critical. Regardless of the way the programme is designed, how management initially “sells” the approach to its employees, and how those employees react to it, tend to be the best predictors of whether or not the programme will succeed on a long-term basis.

### What is a team?

The term “team” has been applied to a number of different types of work group. Definitions as to what a team is or does, how teams are structured, how team members differ from traditional employees, what limitations are placed on teams, and how team members will be held accountable can vary greatly from one company to another. A work group, or team, can best be defined as a group of employees working towards a specific goal, interacting to share information about the best procedures or practices, and making decisions which encourage all team members to perform to their full potential.

In general, a team is a group of employees who are responsible for producing a whole product or providing a complete service in a large work environment where all team members are expected to know all jobs assigned to each member. They typically have the authority to implement, not just recommend, specific courses of action related to quality and productivity enhancement. In contrast, a “quality circle” is a group of employees who meet regularly to examine problems related to quality and productivity in their department and, as a group, recommend solutions to these problems based on their intimate knowledge of the work situation. The group is free to analyse problems as it so desires; it is not

directed to reach specific solutions predetermined by management.

The primary advantage of the team approach is that decisions reached by a group tend to be superior, on average, to decisions made by individuals. The disadvantages include the realization that team decision making can be a very time-consuming venture that requires all team members to be proficient in both technical and human relations skills. This necessitates training and commitment to the concept. Managers must also be willing to relinquish some of their authority to the team, thus giving the approach a legitimate chance to succeed. Some managers find it difficult to give up such control.

### Could your company benefit from teams?

Before any decision is made to switch to a team approach, management in the company should first conduct a needs analysis in order to determine both the desirability and the suitability of making such a definitive change to the existing management structure. This will also provide the perfect opportunity to confirm and refine initial ideas and apprehensions about a team programme. The needs analysis should be relatively straightforward and not involve a great deal of time. A thorough analysis can usually be completed in a only a few weeks. It should clearly define any problems the company is currently experiencing and provide a sound rationale for proceeding.

The needs analysis instrument should be designed so that it solicits input from both management and employees. A well-worded needs analysis will probe your employees as to the difficulties they are currently having on the job and help you to determine if getting them working together in a group will help solve these problems. Furthermore, a good needs analysis will add substantial credibility when presenting arguments regarding the potential benefits of a team approach to upper management, and it will prove invaluable when the time comes to assess team performance. On the other hand, if the needs analysis seems to indicate that your company will not benefit from teams, accept it. The company may still be able to benefit from using teams in some capacity, such as for improving safety in individual departments, but using them as a mechanism for improving the

production process may not be realistic given your current situation.

One final note. If the needs analysis seems to indicate that employees should be able to get along better with each other, or that communication between management and employees needs to be improved, keep in mind that there may be easier and more efficient ways to accomplish these goals without implementing a full-blown team programme. Unfortunately, many companies adopt the team approach solely because they want their people to be able to work together more effectively. By itself, this does not constitute sufficient justification for instituting a comprehensive team programme.

### **What is the “best way” to implement teams?**

If the needs analysis indicates that your company could indeed benefit from using teams, then it is essential to develop a realistic and pragmatic implementation plan. The plan should address what teams will be required to do, the goals and objectives for which they will be held accountable, and the various stages of the implementation process. The implementation plan must also include the expected outcomes from a team, how success will be measured, what responsibilities will be delegated to the team, what resources will be put at their disposal, who will monitor the progress of the team, how the organization intends to measure progress, and what rewards, if any, will be offered. Admittedly, each of these items are complex management concerns with complex answers. They must all be thoroughly addressed, however, if the team approach is to be successful.

Another critical feature of implementing the team approach has to do with the provision of an appropriate framework for monitoring team progress. If you are the manager responsible for the successful implementation of a company-wide team programme, you will probably want all the help you can get. A good steering committee, or advisory team, will help sell the approach to other constituencies in the company as well as assist in developing the programme to its maximum potential. The steering committee's primary responsibility is to oversee all aspects of the implementation of the team approach and it usually stays in place once the teams are formed and functioning on a regular basis. The steering

committee's role is to carefully monitor the progress of the various teams, reinforce what the teams are doing, provide an avenue for feedback from all levels, facilitate various follow-up activities, and report to upper management on an ongoing basis. Moreover, the membership of the steering committee should change periodically so that it always maintains a fresh and realistic perspective.

Establishing measurable goals and objectives for each team is an indispensable part of the implementation plan and helps the steering committee to monitor progress and evaluate outcomes. Team goals are typically broad statements of what the team is to accomplish, while objectives are usually much more specific. In most cases, management provides the goals and the team is responsible for determining the specific objectives needed to accomplish those goals. Establishing clear-cut goals and objectives is an integral part of the implementation plan, and should precede any consideration of who will serve on a particular team or what training they should receive.

### **What is management's role when implementing teams?**

So the company has decided to give the team approach a legitimate chance. The needs analysis has been conducted and the implementation plan is complete and ready to go. The concept has been carefully explained and discussed at all levels of the company. The steering committee is slowly forging ahead and everything seems in good shape. But does the team project have the full and unwavering support of management? More importantly, do the rank and file perceive that management is behind the effort 100 per cent? When it comes to implementing the team approach, perception is very often reality.

A concerted effort by front-line employees is obviously necessary, but seldom sufficient, to make teams successful; i.e. it takes more than employee dedication to make the team approach work. Usually, employees have been told that management is planning to change the way things have always been done. It is simply human nature for employees to be suspicious of management's intentions. How will this “team approach” affect my job? Am I going to be laid off? Are they really serious about this? Will things really be different? These are all questions that frequently go through employees' minds when a company

institutes teams. Only when employees really believe that management is serious about teams, and especially when they see that management is also changing, will they gradually begin to accept their role in the team process. The importance of management support in transitioning to a team approach cannot be overemphasized.

### How fast can we move to teams?

When some companies adopt the team approach, they attempt to implement the concept throughout the entire company or plant in the space of a few months or even a few weeks. This strategy often yields disastrous results. Most people accept change only when it occurs slowly and somewhat evenly. Employees will only get excited about the team approach when management can point to some definitive examples of how it has been successful in the context of the present company. This is usually accomplished by starting with two or three teams which have been carefully selected and given legitimate projects to work on which then culminate in meaningful and visible results. Success with these teams will make moving the concept to the remainder of the workforce much easier. When employees see that these teams work, they will be much more receptive to being assigned to a team.

A few small-scale successes often result in a single large-scale triumph. One colossal failure, however, will only serve to make employees, and especially management, that much more apprehensive about future changes. When you can point to positive accomplishments, and to the rewards which have accompanied those accomplishments, then even the more resistant managers and employees will tend to be more open to giving the team approach a fair chance.

Using a gradual implementation strategy may be more difficult for some managers to apply than it is for many employees to accept. Managers sometimes strive to get the team approach in place as soon as possible in order to reap the rewards they anticipate. Watch out! This is that same quick-fix mentality that was discussed previously. The biggest obstacle to implementing the team approach may not be the inability to garner employee acceptance. It may be the inability to slow management down to a reasonable pace.

### Who is responsible for team performance?

For several years companies were told that accountability was inherently “bad”. To hold someone accountable always seemed to imply something rather negative; it was as though accountability equated to some sort of implicit threat. The fact is that accountability is absolutely essential to the success of the team approach. Accountability is virtually inescapable. Employees must always be held accountable to someone for the quality of their work. In addition, the accountability process must be clearly defined so that it is understood by everyone in the organization.

The need for accountability is as great, if not greater, for the team approach as it is for more traditional forms of management. Team members must have a deep understanding of why the team exists, how it functions, and to whom it is accountable. The parameters within which the team operates must be carefully delineated and the decision-making process should be thoroughly understood and accepted by everyone on the team. Similarly, team leaders must be able to differentiate their role from that of the rest of the group and be willing to assume some degree of responsibility for the team’s progress.

Along those same lines, it is absolutely essential that team leaders need to be selected carefully and trained explicitly in how to do their new job. Team leaders must possess a variety of attributes and highly developed interpersonal skills in order to be successful in their assigned role. The primary responsibility of a team leader is to co-ordinate the day-to-day activities of the entire team. The key word here is “co-ordinate”. The decisions are actually made by the team; the team leader merely facilitates the process in an orderly and results-oriented manner. The team leader is not a manager in the traditional sense. It takes a lot of time and practice for most people to become effective team leaders. Many have to rethink their traditional understanding of the management process and adjust their attitudes and behaviours in the light of the realities brought about by the team approach.

Good managers typically have a fairly accurate understanding of the different strengths and weaknesses of their various employees. When selecting team leaders, though, more objective data are often needed. Several instruments are available which can

be used to determine an employee's potential to be a successful team leader. Many of these assessments give both quantitative and qualitative information concerning an individual's unique personality traits, general human relations skills, and even the specific job skills needed to lead a self-directed work team. Team leaders can literally make or break an entire team programme. Extra care should be taken to ensure that only the best employees are given this pivotal responsibility.

A few companies, when implementing the team approach, "select" their team leaders by merely renaming their current supervisors. Once again, the quick-fix mentality is probably alive and well in such instances. Some supervisors can be successfully retrained as team leaders, others cannot. A supervisor, particularly an experienced one, will not automatically adopt a new set of behaviours and attitudes simply because they now have a new title. While it is possible to begin team training and team leader training simultaneously, careful planning must be undertaken to assure that team leaders acquire the necessary competences before they are given full responsibility for a self-directed work team.

### **What about team training?**

Without a doubt, team training has been the most prevalent form of instruction requested by business and industry during the last decade or so. Companies have spent millions of dollars hiring consultants to train their workforce on the team approach. Still, in many cases the results have been less than spectacular; i.e. the expectations of management have far outdistanced the actual gains in productivity, quality, or employee morale. While training is indeed an integral component in any move to a team approach, it must be pointed out that training alone will never automatically convert a group of employees into a "team", nor will training in and of itself precipitate empowerment among the rank and file.

When changing their management structure to a team approach, some companies have a tendency to put all their eggs in the so-called "training" basket. That is, they depend on training alone to achieve a successful transition. In setting up their training programmes, many of these companies simply select session topics with titles that seem to meet their perceived needs. Since their overall

training needs have not been properly identified and validated through an appropriate needs analysis, these perceptions are often inaccurate and many times the resulting training is irrelevant or even counterproductive. And while it is true that a few topics designed for team leaders or members seem fairly obvious, it is only after a company conducts an in-depth needs analysis that management can be relatively sure of the need for training on a particular topic.

It should be noted that in certain instances it is acceptable to begin a training programme prior to the formal completion of the needs analysis so long as the process is completed prior to the scheduling of the bulk of the training sessions. When conducting such preliminary training, it is usually best to select universal topics such as those pertaining to how teams function in general or how team meetings are typically conducted.

Some managers seem to feel that their responsibilities end once a training programme has been selected and instituted. As a result, they may neglect many of the critical dimensions that enable people to function together as a team. The end result is usually a very negative experience with teams. When this occurs, as it inevitably does when training is assigned such unrealistic expectations, these managers usually end up blaming the concept, rather than themselves, for the failure. The truth is that training is only a small part of the overall picture even though it takes a considerable amount of time and effort. Management must be patient and give the training time to work.

Finally, it is absolutely essential that training be provided for all management personnel in addition to all front-line employees. And management should always be trained first, before any other groups in the company. Training should give managers an operational understanding of how teams ought to function in the company, and it should help to identify and define the problems that will be encountered as the implementation proceeds throughout the company. Keep in mind that if management cannot find the time to attend needed training sessions, it is a safe bet that they are not serious about the team approach.

### **Will our teams succeed?**

What makes some companies succeed with a team approach, where others fail? Is there a

single identifiable variable, or is it a composite of several inter-related factors? Is it management's attitude, employee receptiveness, the training programme, or a combination of these and other considerations? One of the most visible problems associated with the adoption of teams centres on a lack of planning regarding implementation of the concept. The old saying that "if you don't know where you're going you will end up somewhere else" certainly applies to instituting the team concept. Many companies established teams before they clearly understood how they can best benefit the organization.

The bottom line is that successful teams result from thoughtful and serious planning. A great deal of attention must be paid to detail and desired outcomes. Difficulties arise when there is a lack of a coherent foresight regarding what teams are expected to accomplish and how those accomplishments will be measured and rewarded. If these preliminary considerations are not given careful thought and the process is not implemented in a logical, systematic, and sensitive manner, it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to have a successful team programme in your company. What you really need is managers with a common-sense approach to both people and productivity. Unfortunately, internal and external pressures to "get the teams going" sometimes push common sense aside.

There are legitimate reasons for many of the problems that are currently surfacing with respect to teams. If teams are not living up to their original expectations, it may be time to rethink how they were implemented and how they are currently being managed. In other words, it may be time to pause, step back, and make sure that the company's rationale for establishing teams was legitimate, and, more importantly, that the operating parameters within which the teams are functioning are appropriate given the general nature of the organizational environment.

Realistically, most companies experience a lot of initial problems when moving to a team approach. There are a number of questions which will need to be answered if your company experiences difficulties with the team approach. For instance, has the process been given enough time to demonstrate its true potential? When some of the most visible team experiments are having problems, it is not uncommon for many managers to want to discard the entire approach and assume more

of a traditional, directive posture. With respect to the team approach, patience, especially in the beginning, is indeed a virtue. Most teams have an almost innate tendency to be successful, but success is usually not instantaneous. Flexibility is imperative when working in a team architecture. Flexibility implies that managers typically have to change more than their employees. In almost all cases, what eventually evolves is often far different from what was originally envisaged.

Again, it is important to reiterate that not all companies can benefit substantially from the team approach. Just because the company down the road is bragging about their success with teams does not necessarily mean that the strategy will work for your organization. For example, companies which manufacture a simple product with a stable and well-established process may find it difficult to realize the traditional advantages associated with teams; i.e. the opportunities for a team to significantly improve the production process and, by inference, the quality of the product, may be practically non-existent. In other companies, individual employees, working alone, may be better equipped to achieve company goals and objectives. As many managers know, sometimes the best way to get something done is still to assign it to your single best worker, not to a team.

### **What about team efficacy?**

What it all comes down to is that there are really four fundamental requirements for successfully implementing the team approach. First, team members must be given an opportunity to truly perform; i.e. they must be allowed to contribute meaningfully by drawing on their individual strengths and insights. Second, team members must be given an opportunity to solve real problems and make real decisions in an atmosphere that values their judgement. Teams which are given only "token" problems to solve will soon lose their enthusiasm for the team approach and eventually dismiss management's efforts as being less than sincere. Third, team members must always feel that they are supported, without exception, by upper management. If team members ever feel that there is even a remote possibility that they are being scapegoated, the team approach is doomed. Fourth, training must be provided on a continual basis for everyone

associated with the team approach. As team leaders, as well as the teams in general, become more proficient at taking on new and more complex challenges, there will be an ongoing and continuous need for new skills and competences. Training is a never-ending proposition.

Team efficacy occurs when employees honestly believe that the team initiative is real and that management is serious about using and maintaining teams. The goal of all team programmes is to reach team efficacy. Team efficacy is where attitudinal and behavioural changes start to take hold and the organizational culture starts to transform into a supportive, nurturing environment where everyone feels that their contributions are appreciated, desired, and absolutely essential to the future of the company.

Making the transition to the team management approach is not an easy assignment. It is hard to move slowly, to build on small-scale successes gradually, and to adhere patiently to an implementation plan that seems to be

constantly changing. But then again, hitting a moving target is always much harder than hitting a stationary one. Teams are ideally suited to today's turbulent market environment where increasing quality and decreasing costs are the primary characteristics of companies that continue to grow and flourish. Increasingly, the ability to hit the moving target is a prerequisite for survival.

The team approach is about doing things better. If the traditional approach to management was indeed the best way, then there would be no impetus to change to something better. But centuries of attempting to manage through strict control have demonstrated time and time again that it is not the best way. The team approach is vastly superior to traditional forms of management. But it requires a great deal of initial effort, is very time consuming, and demands relentless, ongoing support. The energy and conviction needed to successfully implement the team approach is substantial. But then again, so are the potential rewards.