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Making Production Teams Work

In the past, many companies used assembly lines or specialized divisions to carry out operations. These days, many companies can be found using production teams. A production team is a group of people with various skillsets, who are totally or substantially responsible for producing a product or a component of a product. This is contrasted against a typical structure where specialists collaborate to complete a product, but each group of specialists report into distinct functional organizations.

Teams are now considered to be the best way to fully utilize employee skills. This has caused a clear shift from process-based and function-based operations to people-based operations. More and more, building products or components requires more coordination between different functional areas. This is most easily done through cross-functional production teams. Production teams work on two fronts:

- They increase the level of involvement, motivation, and job satisfaction among the members.
- They develop ideas for improvement. These ideas, when implemented, bring about improvements in quality or performance.

Motivation and job satisfaction play an important role in empowering employees to be more active in first generating, and then implementing, ideas for improvement.

Companies have recognized that human dynamics greatly affect teams. A major challenge that companies face is employee resistance to teams. This is especially true if the company's operations were not formerly team-based. Even after employees accept the idea of working in teams, conflicts within the group can cause problems.

Personality Conflicts

Personality conflicts can have a very harmful effect on the team's performance, especially if the team is small. Conflicts can also be caused by differing opinions among the team members concerning the execution of activities and tasks. Each member has his or her own ideas about how a task should be carried out. These differences can actually be beneficial if they challenge team members to find the best and most viable solution. However, they are harmful if they prevent progress from being made or if they progress into personality conflicts. The team manager should do their best to resolve differing opinions before they deteriorate into personality conflicts. Production teams should be allowed a grace period as the team gets comfortable working with one another, but companies expect them to start performing better as time goes by.

Despite the widespread interest of companies in forming production teams, the evidence seems to say that teams are not very successful. There is usually some performance improvement in the short term, but these benefits tend to disappear in the long run. Consider the case of quality circles. Quality circles, a type of production team, have been found to increase quality initially, for short periods ranging from one and a half to three

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years. However, these improvements seem to vanish later. Sometimes the situation even becomes worse than it was before. Why does this happen?

One possible reason is that, in most companies, members of quality circles are expected to generate ideas for improvement; however, they do not have the power to implement these decisions. This power lies with managers who are not part of the quality circle. In situations where this is true, lots of ideas get put aside or ignored due to miscommunication or lack of commitment from the management. The team becomes frustrated when none of its suggestions are implemented and employees tend to decrease their involvement in the team.

Another reason that performance declines is that production teams are often not part of the mainstream organizational structure. Because of this, production teams have a low priority when resources are distributed. In addition, there is no organized performance recognition for contribution within production teams like quality circles. The result is that the initial interest shown by the members in production teams dies down.

How to Make Production teams Work

For production teams to work, companies must:

- Make employee participation mandatory.
- Ensure involvement and commitment of the management to the production teams.
- Provide production teams the freedom, authority, and resources to implement measures that they have identified.

Even though American companies have tried to emulate Japanese quality circles, important differences exist between the methods employed in the two countries. Japanese companies have always operated on the belief that every employee can provide valuable inputs to performance improvement. They also believe that employees at all levels can play an important role in the implementation of these ideas. Thus, in most Japanese companies, teams like quality circles receive organization-wide acceptance and formal recognition. American companies, on the other hand, do not have this mindset. Because of this, American efforts to set up quality circles have not seen the same type of success as in Japan.

Team Design

Designing production teams can be a challenging task. Various points need to be considered, including the size of the team, who should be a member, and the extent of power/influence the group will have to implement decisions.

As far as size goes, teams should not be so small that they become meaningless, but they should also not be so large that it becomes difficult to form agreements and implement decisions.

Next, consider who will be included on the team. In manufacturing plants, teams will have to be designed so that every worker is part of at least one team. This ensures that all workers have an opportunity to voice their ideas. It also ensures that even if not everyone

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contributes ideas, they will at least have a say in the decision-making process. Designing teams so that all employees are part of a team means that team participation is made mandatory. This paves the way for formal recognition and acceptance of decisions made by the team. Eventually, continuous improvement through teamwork becomes a normal aspect of the employee's job profile.

Production teams should not only be composed of plant workers. For instance, production teams should include a facilitator. This person should receive the necessary training in facilitating teamwork and work as a link between his team, other teams, and management. A facilitator is especially crucial for a team during its early stages of functioning. The team should also include other influential members of the plant, such as production engineers. This gives the team direct access to necessary expertise, resources, and facilities that are necessary to implement their decisions.

Management Involvement

Management involvement and support are crucial to the success of production teams. Formal recognition and plant-wide acceptance of production teams will not occur without management backing and support. This support cannot disappear after the team initiation; it needs to be ongoing. Management involvement should provide a direction and vision for the teams and, more importantly, the resources necessary for the teams to accomplish their goals.

Management should closely monitor the progress made by the teams and provide rewards for excellent work. The company should implement a compensation system that encourages contributions - both as an individual and as a team.

Team Management

There is often a tendency to expect quick results when a production team is introduced. Unfortunately, it does not happen that fast. Production personnel need time to adjust to working in teams. Being a good individual performer does not automatically guarantee that the worker will do well in a team. A different mindset is needed for team based performance and problem solving. Members in a team will have to find a common purpose and work towards achieving common goals. Workers have to make adjustments to minimize the amount of conflict and resistance that occurs within the team. Thus, when a team is first thrown together, time needs to be spent resolving conflicts and developing a performance-based team dynamic.

Training team members in conflict management can help this process. Making the team members focus on team goals during meetings and discussions can help to reduce personality conflicts. The team facilitator can play a crucial role in making this happen. Work-based conflicts, on the other hand, are related to disagreements about improvement ideas and their implementation. As mentioned earlier, this type of conflict can prove beneficial because workers are challenged to come up with creative solutions. However, failing to channel work-based conflicts can cause them to become personality conflicts.

Once the initial resistance and conflict issues have been brought under control, the team can actually begin generating and implementing ideas for improvement. Performance



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improvements will depend on the processes and work that each team is involved in, and will therefore vary from team to team. Often, labor-intensive processes tend to focus on performance improvement more so than capital intensive and automated processes. Thus, management needs take different approaches and have different expectations for various types of teams.

Although there are issues that arise when teams are introduced, the benefits are well worth the effort. Production teams are indeed going to play a crucial role in the success of companies in the future.