



## TenStep Supplemental Paper

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### Self Managed Teams

Teamwork can provide many benefits in the business world today. Through teamwork, employees become more motivated and enthusiastic, develop new ideas to improve company performance, and assume greater responsibility in putting these plans into action. Absenteeism, work-related injuries and conflicts, and quality defects decrease while employee productivity and customer satisfaction increase.

Self Managed Teams, or SMTs, are a specific type of team that maintains a high degree of collaboration, and manages itself, with the goal of becoming a very high-performing team. With SMTs, specific performance goals are established, tracked, met, and evaluated on an ongoing basis. Trust grows among the team members as work progresses, and they become motivated to accept more difficult challenges. The focus in these types of groups is on performance, as well as on teamwork. Their success requires strong personal and company commitment, available time, skills development, and support from team members and management.

#### Preparation

To make the most of the benefits that SMTs can offer, companies have to consider such design factors as team size, resource allocation, performance challenges, and decision-making authority. The team members must be trained, but they cannot be trained in every possible contingency. One of the objectives of a SMT is that they will be flexible enough to resolve unforeseen problems when they occur. No amount of training and planning can bring perfect results. Unforeseen problems will certainly arise, and team must be prepared to invest adequate resources and energy even after the implementation stages.

All SMTs need prior training to prepare them to work in this new paradigm. A very common mistake is to throw people into a self managed environment without adequate preparation. This results in chaos, frustration and paralysis. It is also possible to provide too much training. If you provide too much training, employees may not be able to absorb all ideas presented, and the percentage of skills retained is low. This is not disastrous, but it does add extra cost to the preparation for little value. The best time to offer training is when the need for learning arises. For SMTs, that time would be when the team encounters situations it cannot handle. The initial training should give the team a good start, but the company should be prepared to offer ongoing training as it is required.

When companies implement SMTs, they shift their focus from the concept of 'supervisors' to 'coaches,' or team leaders. While a supervisor's role is to make decisions and instruct team members in how to tackle any situation, the role of a coach is to guide team members and help them improve their decision-making skills through experience. Thus, the skills expected of coaches are quite different from those of supervisors. Their responsibilities shift from getting work done to developing the capabilities of team members. This is done by encouraging discussions, asking questions and providing explanations to raise the team's level of thinking.



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### **Work as a Single Unit**

To be successful, an SMT should work as a single unit, not as a group of individuals. Seeking out individual team members to deal with breakdowns or unexpected situations may bring quick solutions, but it hampers teamwork in the long run.

It is important to remember that when dealing with SMTs, all issues and requests should be brought to the team and not directly to the coach or to individual team members. Such interactions hinder the SMT's sense of collective responsibility. Employees outside the SMT should respect its identity to help facilitate its growth.

### **Rotate Formal Team Leadership**

One of the biggest mistakes committed during the implementation of SMTs is selecting a good performer as the "team leader." The leader is assigned important tasks such as running team meetings, scheduling work, and attending meetings with other groups. At first glance, this approach seems to be in the best interest of the SMTs. It assigns extra responsibility to one team member and hopefully ensures that the tasks will be completed with the best possible results. Unfortunately, this could lead to some harmful consequences. The other team members might tend to shirk responsibility and ownership. This hampers the team's development. One option is to rotate leadership and assign each team member one or two leadership tasks for a period of time. Rotating leadership has several advantages. It fosters learning, increases empathy, and gives each member an opportunity to learn a range of tasks. Also, rotation enhances overall commitment because over time, each member has a chance to perform each task and take on each responsibility.

### **Summary**

It is obvious that implementation, not design, is the toughest part of introducing an SMT. It is necessary to set reasonable expectations at the start and then customize and make adjustments based on the specific company's situation. Although certainly not easy, implementing SMTs is an effective way for a company to reach its highest potential and to create a competitive advantage using teams and the power of teamwork.