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Tracy M. Lara

Kent State University - Kent Campus, tlara2@kent.edu

Aaron W. Hughey

Western Kentucky University, aaron.hughey@wku.edu

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Implementing the team approach in higher education

Important questions and advice for administrators

Tracy M. Lara and Aaron W. Hughey

Abstract: *Many companies have implemented the team approach as a way to empower their employees in an effort to enhance productivity, quality and overall profitability. While application of the concept to higher education administration has been limited, colleges and universities could benefit from the team approach if implemented appropriately and conscientiously. The authors discuss some of the issues and concerns that are relevant to implementing the team approach in an academic environment. Suggestions for implementing teams in higher education are provided, including the difference between the team approach and traditional administration, the importance of a preliminary needs assessment, the development of an implementation plan, the critical role of leadership, dealing with issues of assessment and accountability, and the concept of team efficacy.*

Keywords: *teams; teamwork; empowerment; university administration; leadership*

Dr Lara is Assistant Professor, Department of Teaching, Leadership, and Curriculum Studies, College & Graduate School of Education, Health, and Human Services, 404 White Hall, Kent, OH 44242, USA. Tel: +1 330 672 2580. E-mail: tlara@kent.edu. Dr Hughey is Professor and Department Head, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, TPH 409-A, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY 42101, USA. Tel: +1 270 745 4953. Fax: +1 270 745 5031. E-mail: Aaron.Hughey@wku.edu.

Over the last thirty years, numerous companies have adopted the team approach, which is built on the assumption that decisions reached by a group are superior, on average, to decisions made by individuals (LaFasto and Larson, 2001; Kinlaw, 1998; Purser and Cabana, 1998). However, this requires everyone to be proficient both in their human relations skills as well as in their technical abilities (Burpitt and Bigoness, 1997).

Higher education could benefit greatly from the team approach if administrators were willing to implement the approach in a legitimate way (Newman *et al*, 2004; Cranton, 1998; Heckscher and Donnellon, 1994). There seems to be general agreement that inherent flaws in hierarchical systems of management are increasingly rendering these systems obsolete in academe (Newman *et al*, 2004; Axelrod, 2000; Hickman, 1998). In reality,

empowerment represents a return to faculty governance and offers staff a model for ownership in the institutional culture (Kirkman and Rosen, 1999). If colleges are to remain responsive to the needs of an increasingly diverse student population, realizing this model is necessary (Axelrod, 2000; Bensimon and Neumann, 1993) and besides higher education has much to gain from implementing the team approach (Cranton, 1998). The key lies in understanding the full implications of the concept and in the total commitment needed to make the strategy work (Kirkman and Rosen, 1999; Arnwine, 1995).

Why consider the team approach in higher education?

Given the long and distinguished history of higher education and its adherence to a system of self-governance and managerial control that served it well for hundreds of years, it is legitimate to consider why the shift to a team approach might be desirable (Newman *et al*, 2004; Cranton, 1998; Huber, 1997). Most colleges and universities have organizational mechanisms in place that are inherently designed to solicit input and facilitate direction from academics in a manner that best serves the entire enterprise (Bensimon and Neumann, 1993). Indeed, administrators, and especially department chairs, typically have responsibilities in a number of complex yet interrelated areas, including teaching, research and public service (Newman *et al*, 2004; Huber, 1997; Bensimon and Neumann, 1993). The purpose of this paper is not to argue against the current form of administrative oversight that has proven itself immensely successful during the history of the academy (Cranton, 1998; Bensimon and Neumann, 1993). Rather, the primary intention is to suggest a different approach to management in post-secondary institutions that could be of benefit given the changing nature of higher education as it responds to globalization, technological innovation and general shifts in economic and cultural realities (Newman *et al*, 2004; Cranton, 1998). Adapting the team approach to higher education is seen as a way to augment the predominant form of governance in higher education; it should not be viewed as a burdensome addition to a system that is already operating at near capacity or as an attempt to supplant a system that has proven its effectiveness (Nall, 1998; West and Anderson, 1996; Bensimon and Neumann, 1993; Fairholm, 1991).

Is the team approach appropriate?

Before the decision is made to move to a team approach, the administration should first conduct a

needs analysis to determine both the desirability and the suitability of making such a definitive change to the institution's existing culture (Robinson *et al*, 2007; Palmes, 2006). This will also provide an excellent opportunity to identify and address initial apprehensions about moving to a team approach (Dietrich and Childress, 2004). The needs analysis should be relatively straightforward and should not take a great deal of time (Renn, 1998). Whereas the word 'assessment' can be as threatening to members of an organization as the idea of 'change' and certainly of change to a team approach, it need not be (Palmes, 2006). A thorough needs assessment can be orchestrated in a short timeframe when targeted appropriately (Anderson and West, 1998). Examining the *status quo* for problem solving within an organization will illuminate challenges currently faced and methods traditionally employed to solve problems as well as key personnel involved, decision making strategies and leadership issues (Campion *et al*, 1996; Fisher, 1995). The needs analysis is useful in bolstering arguments for a team approach when the question, 'Are current approaches working with the level of effectiveness desired?' is answered unfavourably (Katzenbach, 1998). Furthermore, comparing the potential benefits of a team approach to hierarchical approaches lends credibility and impetus to the implementation (Bensimon and Neumann, 1993).

What is the team approach and how is it implemented?

The term 'team' has been applied to a number of different types of work groups (Campion *et al*, 1996). What constitutes a team, how teams are structured, how team members differ from traditional employees, what limitations are placed on teams, and how team members are held accountable can vary greatly from one organization to another (Franz, 2004; Hackman, 1990). For the purposes of this article, a 'team' is defined as a group of individuals responsible for providing a complete service within a large work environment of which all members are expected to know the jobs assigned to every person on the team (LaFasto and Larson, 2001; Huszczo, 1996). These teams typically have the authority to implement, not just recommend, specific courses of action related to quality and productivity enhancement (Franz, 2004; Lewis, 1998; Jewell and Reitz, 1981). They work together to achieve a specific goal by sharing information about best procedures or practices and by making decisions that encourage all team members to perform to their full potential (Palmes, 2006; Kinlaw, 1991).

What are the basic requirements?

Whether in industry or higher education, there seem to be four fundamental requirements for successfully implementing the team approach (LaFasto and Larson, 2001; Wellins *et al.*, 1994). First, team members must be given an opportunity to perform: they must be allowed to contribute meaningfully by drawing on their individual strengths and insights (Kirkman and Rosen, 1999; Wellins *et al.*, 1991). Second, team members must be given an opportunity to solve real problems and make real decisions in an atmosphere that values their judgment (Franz, 2004; Miller, 2003). Third, team members must always feel that they are supported, without exception, by upper administration (Ellemers *et al.*, 1999; Cranton, 1998; Huber, 1997). Fourth, training must be provided on a continual basis for everyone associated with the team approach (Bascal and Associates, 2007; Boyett and Boyett, 1998). Thus a learning organization is created. Team leaders and members become more proficient in taking on new and more complex challenges, creating an ongoing and continuous need for the development of new competencies and skills (Fisher, 2000; Forsyth, 1999).

Why is leadership critical?

In as much as team personnel selection is vital in forming effective teams, placing skilled and trained leaders within groups is essential (Fisher, 2000; Ludwig, 1998). Often, academic leaders are accomplished academics or technicians with little or no leadership training or skills (Cranton, 1998; Huber, 1997). Sadly, the qualities that have contributed to the success of academics – independence, drive and specialization – are antithetical to the qualities and skills necessary in effective team leadership (Fairholm, 1991; Dobbins and Zaccaro, 1986). Leaders must possess highly-developed interpersonal skills to motivate, focus, develop and guide group action (Ludwig, 1998; Burpitt and Bigoness, 1997). The primary responsibility of a team leader is to coordinate the day-to-day activities of the team, with the emphasis on ‘coordinate’ (Heckscher and Donnellon, 1994; Dobbins & Zaccaro, 1986). The decisions are actually made by the team; the leader merely facilitates the process in an orderly and results-oriented way (Dobbins and Zaccaro, 1986). Therefore, a collectivist thought process is more important than the individualist mindset which traditionally has led to the success and accomplishment of academics who later find themselves in a very uncomfortable leadership role (Michalisin *et al.*, 2004; Bollen and Hoyle, 1990; Dobbins and Zaccaro, 1986). The team leader is not a director or department chair in

the traditional academic sense (Cranton, 1998; Bensimon and Neumann, 1993). It takes a lot of time and practice for most administrators to become effective team leaders (Ciulla, 1998; Bensimon & Neumann, 1993). They have to rethink their traditional understanding of the management/supervisory process and adjust their attitudes and behaviours in light of the realities brought about by the team approach (Franz, 2004; Michalisin *et al.*, 2004).

What is the difference between team leaders and traditional administrators?

Some institutions, when implementing the team approach, have selected their team leaders by merely renaming their current directors or department chairs (Cranton, 1998; Katzenbach, 1998). In reality, some traditional administrators can be successfully retrained as team leaders; others cannot (Fisher, 2000; Cottrill, 1997). Many administrators, especially the more experienced ones, will not automatically adopt a new set of behaviours and attitudes simply because they now have a new title (Boone, 1998; Dobbins and Zaccaro, 1986). While it is possible to begin team training and team leader training simultaneously, careful planning must be undertaken to assure that leaders acquire the necessary competencies before they are given full responsibility for a self-directed work team (Lehtonen and Barrett, 2003; Huszyczko, 1996). In many respects, the strategies employed by traditional academic administrators and those used by team leaders are very similar (Cranton, 1998; Bensimon and Neumann, 1993). Both strategies are typically characterized as facilitative rather than directive (Robinson *et al.*, 2007). Coordination seems to be the key concept and this leadership technique fits perfectly with the team approach (Ludwig, 1998).

Why is it important to develop an implementation plan?

If the needs analysis indicates that the institution could benefit from using teams, then it is essential to develop a realistic and pragmatic implementation plan (Belbin, 2004; Renn, 1998). 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 (Boyett and Boyett, 1998; Kinlaw, 1998). 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 (Adams and Kydonieffs, 2000; Fisher, 1995). This plan provides a template from which to assess the team approach. Admittedly, each of these items is a complex management concern with complex answers (Parker, 2007; Cranton, 1998). They must all be thoroughly addressed and measured, however, if the team approach is to be successful (Hackman, 1990).

How can insufficient planning undermine the efficacy of teams?

One of the biggest challenges associated with the adoption of teams centres around a lack of planning in the pre-implementation phase (Parker, 2007). Many institutions have established teams before they have clearly understood how such a move could benefit the organization (Cranton, 1998). The truth seems to be that successful teams result from thoughtful and serious planning (Belbin, 2004; Hackman, 1990). Much attention must be paid to detail and the desired outcomes. Difficulties arise when there is a lack of coherent foresight about what teams are expected to accomplish and how those accomplishments will be measured and rewarded (Institute of Leadership and Management, 2007). 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 achieve a successful team programme in the institution (Parker, 2007; Purser and Cabana, 1998).

Why is it important that staff supports the team approach?

In addition to assessing the results of the team approach, other up-front measures must be implemented to ensure success (Fisher, 1995). Phasing in the team approach as a pilot and 'growing the concept' is a much more prudent action than transforming the entire organization in the shortest time possible (Franz, 2004; Boyett and Boyett, 1998). Most people accept change only when it occurs slowly and somewhat evenly (Zimmermann and Sparrow, 2007; Chen *et al*, 2002). The enthusiasm of academic employees and other staff for the team approach will be generated only if the administration can point to definitive examples of how it has been successful (Cranton, 1998; Bensimon and Neumann, 1993). This is usually accomplished by starting with two or three carefully selected teams, with legitimate projects, and the achievement of meaningful and visible results (Sawyer, 2001; Axelrod, 2000). Success with these teams will facilitate the transition of the remainder of the faculties and staff into work teams (Bensimon and

Neumann, 1993). A few small-scale successes often result in a single large-scale triumph (Lehtonen and Barrett, 2003; Petersen, 2001). When employees believe that the administration is serious about teams, they will begin to accept their role in the team process (Mowday *et al*, 1979). The importance of clear administrative commitment and support in the transition to a team approach cannot be overemphasized (Bacal and Associates, 2007; Cranton, 1998).

Why are goals and objectives important to teams?

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 (Nash, 1999; Price and Mueller, 1986). Team goals are typically broad statements of what the team is to accomplish, while objectives are usually much more specific (Miller, 1996). In most cases, the administration provides the goals and the team is responsible for determining the objectives needed to accomplish those goals (Renn, 1998; Bensimon and Neumann, 1993). This is a key element of the empowerment and success of teams, which must have the latitude to mobilize the resources within the team and institution to achieve the aims of the team (Belbin, 2004). A team's autonomy to act independently of the hierarchy and yet in alignment with the institutional mission and desired outcomes benefits morale within the organization as well as enhancing overall productivity (Kirkman *et al*, 2004). Establishing concise 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 he or she should receive (Fisher, 2000; Larson and LaFasto, 1989).

What is the role of the steering committee?

A critical feature of implementing the team approach is the provision of an appropriate framework for monitoring team progress (US Department of Energy, 1997). A good steering committee, or advisory team, will help to sell the approach to the various constituencies in the institution as well as assist in developing the programme to its maximum potential (Newman *et al*, 2004). The steering committee's role is to monitor the progress of the various teams carefully, reinforce what the teams are doing, provide an avenue for feedback from all levels, facilitate various follow-up activities and report to the senior administration on a regular basis (Michalisin *et al*, 2004). The steering committee's primary responsibility is to oversee all

aspects of the implementation of the team approach, and it usually continues once teams have been formed and are functioning (Belbin, 2004). The membership of the committee should change periodically to maintain a fresh and realistic perspective in the oversight group as well as throughout the organization (Fisher, 1995).

How can teams be held accountable?

Accountability is essential to the success of the team approach, especially in a college or university (Newman *et al*, 2004). The need for accountability is more acute for the team approach than for more traditional forms of management (Kinlaw, 1998; Hackman, 1990). Team members must have a deep understanding of why the team exists, how it functions and to whom it is accountable (Campion *et al*, 1996). The parameters within which the team operates must be carefully delineated and the decision making process should be thoroughly understood and accepted by each team member (Franz, 2004; Eby *et al*, 1999). 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 (Patterson, 1998). Ongoing leadership training and development strengthens the organization, enabling goals and intended outcomes to be met (Eby *et al*, 1999; Kraiger and Cannon-Bowers, 1995).

What problems may occur when implementing teams?

Most institutions experience many problems when moving to a team approach, not because the approach is flawed but because flaws exist in the approach to implementation (Cranton, 1998; Bensimon and Neumann, 1993). There are a number of questions which will need to be answered if the institution experiences difficulties with the team approach (Parker *et al*, 2001). For instance, has the process been given enough time to demonstrate its true potential? When some of the most visible teams are having problems, it is not uncommon for many administrators to want to discard the entire approach and assume more of a traditional, directive posture (Institute of Leadership and Management, 2007; Mackay, 1993). Patience, especially at the beginning, is indeed a virtue. Most teams have an almost innate tendency to be successful, but success is usually not instantaneous (Palmes, 2006; Renn, 1998). Flexibility is imperative when working within a team architecture and room must be created for the possibilities of what may be (Belbin, 2004). Flexibility implies that administrators typically have to change more than their faculty or staff members (Newman *et al*,

2004; Huber, 1997). In almost all cases, what eventually evolves is often far different from what was originally envisaged (Belbin, 2004; Kinlaw, 1991).

What is the bottom line with teams?

The goal of all team programmes is to reach efficacy in achieving organizational or institutional outcomes (Katzenbach, 1998; Renn, 1998). In higher education, team efficacy occurs when faculty members and other staff honestly believe that the team initiative is real and that the administration is committed to using and maintaining teams (Huber, 1997; Bensimon and Neumann, 1993). When attitudinal and behavioural changes start to take hold and the organizational culture starts to transform into a supportive, nurturing environment, morale is boosted as employees feel that their contributions are appreciated, desired and essential to the future of the institution (Levine, 2005; Fisher, 1995).

Making the transition to the team management approach is not an easy assignment, especially in the complex culture that has historically characterized higher education (Newman *et al*, 2004; Cranton, 1998). It is challenging to move slowly, build on small-scale successes gradually and adhere patiently to an implementation plan that seems to be changing constantly (Palmes, 2006). The team approach is ideally suited to today's turbulent academic environment, although it does require a great deal of initial effort, is very time-consuming and demands relentless, ongoing support (Newman *et al*, 2004; Cranton, 1998; Bensimon and Neumann, 1993). The energy and conviction needed to implement the team approach successfully is substantial (LaFasto and Larson, 2001; Fisher, 1995). But then again, so are the potential rewards.

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