Management Paper:

Self-Managing Work Teams

Betty Thomas

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Dr. Richard Moniz

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Introduction

Interest in self-managing work teams (SMWTs) has increased in the last couple of decades. In the early 80s, there was little published research done on this topic. However, since the work environment of both businesses and libraries has changed, there is now more interest in this subject and many more research studies evaluating self-managing work teams.

Several environmental changes have affected management practices, especially for libraries. First, with current economic conditions, managers are operating with budget constraints and face competition for funding. They have to do more with less. Second, the rapid and continuous advances in technology have forced managers to develop new services and change the way they operate. Last, competition with other organizations that offer similar services has increased.

Thus, managers especially in business and industry have been implementing different forms of participative management by increasing employee involvement and decreasing reliance on command and control practices. In the literature, self-managing teams are referred to as autonomous work groups, leaderless groups, self-regulated groups, and self-directed work teams. At Philip Morris USA’s Cabarrus plant, SMWTs were called organizational work units or problem solving units. The former groups were the natural groupings of workers in a department; the latter were cross departmental groups that formed to address particular issues.

Castiglione (2007) defines SMWTs as “relatively independent and empowered clusters of employees possessing the required skills and decisional independence to efficiently accomplish a well-defined project or task” (p. 380). Salem and Lazarus (1992) explained that in SMWTs employees are trained to “use their skills daily to schedule, assign tasks, co-ordinate with other groups, set goals, interface with suppliers, evaluate performance, handle customers, hire new members and deal with discipline
problems” (p.25). A fundamental premise behind SMWTs is that the team as a whole can outperform the sum of its members.

Druskat and Wheeler (2004) point to the prevalence of SMWTs. They found “79% of companies in the Fortune 1000 and 81% of manufacturing organizations” currently used some form of SMWTs (p.65).

While SMWTs have been “well established in European countries”, the management practice is a more recent development in the United States (Stewart & Manz, 1995, p. 747). However, based on his literature review, Castiglione (2007) concludes that SMWTs are an “underutilized tool” in libraries.

Effectiveness

SMWTs have met with success in business. In his book, Leading Self-Directed Work Teams: A Guide to Developing New Team Leadership Skill, Kimball Fisher lists twenty separate university studies that show a positive correlation between effective team practices and organization performance. In Table 3.1, he charts the organization studied, the results obtained such as lowering manufacturing costs by 50% or improving productivity by 250%, and the source of the research study (pages 31-33).

Cohen and Ledford (1994) studied self-managing teams at a telecommunications company and found that SMWTs were more effective than comparable traditionally managed groups that performed the same type of work. Overall performance, productivity, and quality, which were the main goals of the intervention, showed significant effects. They also found that members of SMWTs had higher levels of job satisfaction, growth needs satisfaction, and group satisfaction. The study leaders recommended to top management that SMWTs should be encouraged but cautioned that they not be used as a cost cutting method; that local design was critical; and that certain aspects of the company’s infrastructure such as measurement systems needed to be changed to remove obstacles to implementation.

Interestingly, in another study of SMWTs entitled, The Downside of Self-Management: A Longitudinal Study of the Effects of Conflict on Trust, Autonomy, and Task Interdependence in Self-Managing Teams,
Claus Langfred (2007) seemed to discredit the effectiveness of SMWTs. He found that high conflict in teams correlated with lower autonomy and interdependence which could cause self-managing team dysfunction. However, upon closer examination, his study focused on 35 SMWTs of MBA graduate students, not employees in the work world, who were assigned to teams for four months. In addition, they were not given any training, especially in conflict resolution or group skills. The ultimate conclusion from this study was not that SMWTs were ineffective, but that there was a potential for ineffectiveness if the teams were not properly prepared for working as SMWTs.

**Implementation**

The concerns raised in these studies of the effectiveness of SMWTs are valid. Implementation is a complex process involving organizational culture change. It may take up to two years and effect many different areas of an organization. Investment has to be made well before results begin to appear. There are several books about SMWT implementation in the Further Reading section of this paper.

Several key considerations in implementing SMWTs follow:

*Top management support.* Success of SMWTs depends on top management buying into the change. Both upper and middle management support must be firmly established from the beginning. In fact, since SMWTs are created to help the organization meet its goals, SMWT activities should mesh with the organization’s mission, strategy and operating philosophy (Salem & Lazarus, 1992).

*Cross-training.* If an organization is able to consolidate several job categories into a smaller number of classifications, it simplifies implementation. Otherwise, SMWT members need to be cross trained so that they can rotate between different assignments. In this way too, the members develop new skills and better understand the objectives of the organization. Rotation of leadership is also a form of cross training.
**Organizational structure.** The number of people in a particular SMWT is small, generally ranging between three to 20 people (Salem and Lazarus, 1992). Most SMWTs tend to flatten the organizational structure. Span of control is increased where a manager would “supervise” more than one group. In his article about SMWTs for academic libraries, Castiglione (2007) provides a good graphic of how the organizational structure differs. The two types of organizational structure can be seen below. Figure 1 is a hierarchical organizational chart, and Figure 2 is a SMWT structure (p. 384-385). Prior to implementation, a plan needs to be in place for restructuring the middle level. Whether it is to retrain these employees and move them to other positions, eliminate positions, or revamp the jobs and communicate changes in expectations, a lot of thought needs to be given to this component.

![Figure 1: A Typical Hierarchical Structure](image-url)
Training and development. One approach to implementation begins with assessing professional development needs and providing training. Most likely those needs will include requests in areas such as conflict management and supervisory skills. The next stage would be to provide technical training needed for employees to be cross trained within their teams. Just as teams are formed and ready to begin, training in basic group skills such as group problem solving techniques and effective meetings is critical. Having employees role play group norms and practices is beneficial at this stage too. The SMWTs can then immediately put their skills into practice. As the teams develop and gain more experience, training and development will be more self-directed in that the teams will request training for the group in such subjects as advanced problem solving, brainstorming techniques, team building, group decision making, conflict management, budgeting, and presentation skills (Von Dran, 1988).
Leadership

Of all the subjects related to SMWTs, there appears to be more research on leadership. It might seem odd to focus on the role of external leader for a self-managing work team. Autonomous teams are supposed to be independent to make their own decisions. However, successful teams require leadership. That person might be referred to as a coordinator, facilitator, or consultant. There still needs to be someone who receives direction and information from the upper parts of the organization and who is held accountable for the team.

In a frequently cited study of SMWTs, Manz and Sims (1987) explored this paradoxical role of external leader in a medium sized manufacturing plant. They identified six behaviors that a leader of a SMWT should perform to help the team lead itself effectively. External leaders should...

1. Encourage self-reinforcement.
2. Encourage self-criticism.
3. Encourage self-goal setting.
5. Encourage self-expectation.

In 2004, Druskat and Wheeler published their study on the role of the external leader. They conducted a study of 300 self-managing teams at a large durable consumer goods manufacturing plant. The plant had transitioned to self-managing teams five years prior to the study. They investigated average- and superior-performing leaders to determine the behaviors that made superior-performing leaders.

While one might think that successful external leaders would either have a “hands off” approach or be concerned primarily with encouraging the team as in the Manz and Sims (1987) study, Druskat and Wheeler found that high performing leaders shared one key skill: “managing the boundary between the team and the larger organization” (p. 65). “The superior leaders were able to develop strong relationships with both those in the team and across the organization.” (p. 71). Their model helps to visualize the leadership skills needed to lead self-managing teams.

West, the group’s official leader, rarely interfered with the actual work, nor was he particularly visible in the laboratory....West contributed primarily by causing problems for the engineers to solve and making mundane events and issues appear special....West also had the skills of a good politician. He knew how to develop agendas, build alliances, and negotiate.... When he had a particular objective in mind, he would first go upstairs to sign up senior executives. (p. 283-285)

In a third research study on leadership, Stoker (2008) looked at the relationship between leadership style and SMWT effectiveness. Stoker used a questionnaire with 154 SMWT members of 21 SMWTs. What she found was that member tenure (an objective measure used as a proxy for experience) and leadership style affected SMWT performance (group level measure) and well being (individual level measure). She concluded the following:

1. Short tenured members had higher performance with a team leader who used directed rather than coaching behavior.
2. New team members reported lower performance and higher emotional exhaustion with a team leader who used coaching behavior.
3. For longer tenured members, individual performance was greater and emotional exhaustion was less when the team leader used a coaching style behavior.
Contrary to the assumptions of Manz and Sims, some SMWT members evidently do benefit from directive style leadership. Stoker’s study includes some practical implications for leaders of SMWTs. First, because the importance of an individual member’s experience (tenure on the team), leaders should not use the same leadership style for the entire team. Second, both directing and coaching leadership styles can be effective or ineffective depending on the individual team member. Thus, it becomes important to have team leaders who can be flexible and use both leadership styles. Third, from a human resources perspective, hiring and developing leaders with flexible styles is important for SMWT success.

Application to Libraries

There are some examples of successful, self-managing teams in academic library settings. Poon-Richards (1996) determined from his literature review that two key elements determined success in SMWTs: empowerment and shared leadership. He recognized that, “Self-managed teams can promote job satisfaction while engaging staff members more fully in their library work environment” (p. 82).

*Technical Services at Yale’s Sterling Library.* Crooker, Killheffer and Mandour (1991) explained that the introduction of an integrated online system was the impetus for establishing self managing teams at Sterling. The teams consisted of three to ten members who have a mix of backgrounds, skills, and expertise from every level of the library. While team leaders were selected from the librarian and manager ranks, they were expected to coach team members and relinquish authority to the team as it matured. The greatest challenge for the team members was cross training in every area of technical services. While implementation of SMWTs was expected to provide better service, improve productivity, increase flexibility in the changing environment, and foster job satisfaction; additionally, communication and cooperation across department boundaries improved throughout the library. Team members gained an understanding of the “big picture.” They took ownership of the process.
University of Maryland (UM). Castiglione (2007) highlights the teams established at the University of Maryland. The library used the services of a management consultant from the School of Business in implementation. Four teams were created: information and research services, collection management, information literacy, and access services. They had the support of the library’s administration which encouraged the staff to acquire new skills and flatten the organizational structure. UM found job rotation and cross training increased efficiency, enhanced professional development and improved patron satisfaction. Employees noticed improved communications and felt a re-energized.

RefTeam. Young’s (2004) article details a case history of RefTeam, a self-managing reference team at the University of Albany. In 1999 the library’s administration decided to try a team based approach after four department heads left the library. Despite the lack of thorough planning and organizing a self-managing team within a traditional, hierarchical structure, the RefTeam has been a success. Team members took on the following managerial roles:

* budgeting
* supervising support staff and undergraduate employees
* supervision and training of graduate assistants and interns
* assuming responsibility for a very active departmental continuing education program
* collecting and analyzing departmental statistics related to reference transactions
* taking on committee assignments that would normally fall to a department head
* recording and distributing the minutes of the weekly team meetings
* ensuring hospitality (p. 186).

The team was successful for a number of reasons. At the outset, the first leader, chosen by group consensus, was well respected and had over 25 years of experience. Additionally, the team members had worked with each other for a long time, contributed experience gained elsewhere in the library, and were enthusiastic about the change. Also, the group had substantial management support as demonstrated by a merit pay raises for team members. Furthermore, team members participated in a facilitation skills workshop that resulted in RefTeam cohesion, group problem solving skills, and written group norms. Each June the team has a half-day, off-site retreat to choose the next year’s new leader, devise strategies for staffing in the fall, and determine initiatives for the team. Three years after
formation, they realized they needed to have a clearly written mission, purpose and goals which tied into the department’s strategic plan.

Conclusion

Managers are realizing the possible benefits of SMWTs. Success depends on the organization. In the studies above, businesses tend to change the culture as they change the organization. In the few library examples, SMWTs have only been used on a limited basis within the hierarchical structure. Also, the cases in the library literature have dealt with academic environments only, even though SMWTs could be used in public libraries such as a branch, small public libraries or in departments of a large, main branch.

The successful development of SMWTs does not happen overnight. There needs to be thoughtful, careful planning done in advance of implementation. Without top management’s understanding and total commitment, SMWTs just become another fad. Implementation will impact the organizational culture and structure. Cross training while adding flexibility with a multi-skilled workforce, costs money. Training and development at the point of need increases the chances of success. External leaders need support and training. Teams and their leaders develop over time. The entire process takes time.

However, true SMWTs empower employees. They aren’t just teams. SMWTs have autonomy and authority to make decisions that contribute to the organization’s effectiveness and help to achieve the organization’s mission and goals. Conversely, SMWT members experience increased job satisfaction, morale and team cohesiveness. Library administrators who truly understand self managing teams and their benefits can successfully implement them within their organization.
References


Further Reading


