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Leadership for High Performance Teams:
The Role of Facilitating CPS

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Think for a minute about the value of having truly high performing teams within your organization. While there are many things that impact the performance of a team, both research and experience confirm, the use of a trained facilitator, utilizing the proven approaches and tools of Creative Problem Solving (CPS), can make a huge difference in the productivity of a group.

High-Performance Teams Needed

A team is a collection of a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable (Katzenbach & Smith, 2003). A high-performing team is one that performs extremely well and produces results that exceed both expectations and the performance of other teams or, in other words, is extraordinary.

Since teams are the basic building block of many organizations, transforming groups into high-performing teams is critical. Although rare, high-performance teamwork is one of the most important and influential attributes for organizational success in turbulent times (Castka, Bamber, Sharp, & Belohoubek, 2001). Teamwork of this sort is critical when:

• The task is complex
• Creativity is needed
• The way forward is unclear
• More efficient use of resources is required
• High commitment is desired
• High-quality results are needed quickly

These high-performing teams are rare because there are many barriers and obstacles to be overcome for even fundamental levels of productivity in groups. We are sure that you have suffered through group meetings that were not as productive as they could have been. Some of the obstacles listed below are likely to be familiar:

- A lack of a clear purpose or direction
- Poor commitment and engagement to team performance
- Critical skill gaps or lack of key competencies
- Clashes due to style differences
- Lack of role clarity
- Current work structures focused on individual performance
- Lack of an agreed approach for working together
- Lack of clear accountability for outcomes

There is no shortage of blocks to productive teamwork. In one more example, Lencioni (2002) described five key dysfunctions of a team. These included lack of trust, fear of conflict, lack of communication, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results.

So, if high-performing teams are key to dealing effectively with turbulent environments and organizational success, and there are so many potential pitfalls and blocks, what is needed?

Facilitative Leadership is Required

Of all the things that can help produce high-performing teams, we believe that facilitative leadership is a major factor. Facilitative leadership is different from how we traditionally view leaders as the ultimate decision maker, controller/director, or the lone person at the "top" of the organization. The role of facilitator is however an important part of the leadership equation.

While group leaders or facilitators are widely used in organizations today, there are many erroneous perceptions of their role. Some people see them as meeting planners, logistics coordinators, flip chart secretaries, group recorders, sideline coaches, or even scapegoats when meetings or groups don't go well. Unfortunately, we see these misconceptions played out in meeting after meeting in a number of organizations.

The facilitation of Creative Problem Solving is a process-oriented leadership role that guides the interaction and manages the effective deployment of tools, guidelines, language and behavior in order to help people produce new and useful outcomes.

A facilitative leader adds value by managing the distinction between process and content. By taking on the total responsibility for the process issues, the facilitative leader provides the group the freedom to be 100% immersed in the content. This enables the group to work without the worry of what has to happen next. By taking this role the facilitator significantly reduces the chance that groups go off track or experience the barriers to productive teamwork.

A facilitative leader provides process expertise bringing to bear their knowledge of tools and approaches then selecting for use those that are appropriate given the situation and the group at hand. Facilitators apply guidelines and bring best practices to further reduce the impact of the barriers to high-performance. Teams benefit from the facilitative leader's guidance of interaction within the group, by managing the team roles and the natural differences that exist among people when they are solving problems and managing change. By paying attention to the ways that people on teams interact the facilitative leader can positively impact the climate that exists within the team.

The truth is, the things a facilitator needs to know in order to accomplish the important role that they play are as numerous and varied as the misperceptions people hold about the role itself. This kind of leader seeks to involve and engage people in the work by understanding and providing the tools and the direction that the team needs to be at their best.

The book *"Facilitative Leadership"* (Isaksen, 2000) provides this description of what a facilitator must know, do and believe in order to facilitate groups effectively:

"…facilitators need to know when and how to use a range of creativity methods tools and techniques. They need to know how to manage group dynamics and how to clarify and move a group toward the desired outcomes. They need to be able to intervene on unproductive behaviors and manage the process itself while establishing a climate for creativity. They also need to use their belief in the power of the process and the creative potential of the group to keep a group engaged during tough times."

Facilitative Leadership Involves Skills

What a facilitator knows, does, and believes is clearly connected to their ability to create and lead high performance work teams. Based on our experience in training and developing facilitators we have defined the following seven categories of skills. CPS facilitators:

Use a facilitative approach utilizing their knowledge of process, guidelines and tools in ways that focus on service more than control. They focus on the process being in service to the content of the issue at hand.

Have people management skills that utilize best practice in communication and listening as well as creating the circumstances that enable each individual to bring forth their best efforts.

Observe and manage group behavior assuring that the interactions and other team dynamics like energy, teamwork, and synergy are present and attended to in order to maximize the productivity of the group and create a group climate that is truly conducive to creative effort.

Appraise Tasks to enable a complete understanding of the need, the people, desired outcomes and the context of the situation or challenge.

Design process in a way that maximizes the involvement of the key stakeholders, assures the appropriate starting place to meet the need and enables the most effective use of the team members.

Encourage productive implementation helping to make the link between the creation of the solution and the implementation of it while capturing the insights for the benefit of the team's development.

Apply CPS productively by providing the information, tools, and logistics needed to help the group get started well, stay on track and accomplish the task.

In our years of experience and practice, and for many of the organizations with which we work, the method of choice is Creative Problem Solving (CPS), specifically CPS version 6.1™ (See About CPS 6.1 for more information). We know of no other process for creativity and change that has as much evidence regarding its validation, impact and use (Isaksen, 2008).

Of particular use to the facilitator is the Navigation Component, consisting of Appraising Tasks and Designing Process. By undertaking Appraising Tasks the facilitator creates an understanding of the situation sufficient to qualify the use of the method and to make an appropriate diagnosis of the situation. In utilizing the Designing Process stage of the CPS 6.1 process, the facilitator is able to make choices about the best entry point in the process, select the appropriate tool set to use and plan for the most impact and best use of the group.

CPS facilitators who deliver on these skills and competencies increase the likelihood that teams will reach their potential. As Katenbach and Smith (2003) have indicated, high-performing teams have:

"A strong sense of personal commitment, deeper sense of purpose, more ambitious performance goals, more complete approaches, fuller mutual accountability, and interchangeable as well as complimentary skills."

Facilitative Leadership Can Make a Difference

A recent study sought to demonstrate the difference that a qualified facilitator can make when working with teams. The conclusive results show that when it comes to the number of ideas or options generated, those teams that were led by trained facilitators, produced over 400% more ideas compared to non-facilitated ones. In fact, some of the facilitated teams in the study increased their productivity by nearly 600% (Isaksen & Gaulin, 2005).

Other benefits are derived from learning how to become a qualified facilitator. Some preliminary results from a March, 2009 impact study of CPSB's Igniting Creative Potential: A Focus on Facilitation Course have shown that individuals who received the training report:

- 43% increase in the productivity of the meetings that they lead
- 55% increase in their ability to facilitate teams
- 60% improvement in their ability to manage differences on a team

We'll be providing a full report from this impact study at a later date.

More than a "nice to have", trained facilitative leaders using CPS process and tools are essential enablers of high performance teams!

To Learn More

• Learn more about high performance facilitation training through CPSB's Igniting Creative Potential: A Focus on Facilitation Course. Go to:
http://www.cpsb.com/services/creative-capacity/icp

• To learn more about the study cited in this article, and the efficacy of brainstorming as an idea generation tool, go to:
www.cpsb.com/research/articles/creative-problem-solving/Reexamination-of-Brainstorming-Research.pdf

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