

Cross-functional teams

Companies grow with cohesive blending of talents

Question:

I appreciated your last article on developing teams. We've been using cross-functional teams for some time. Coordination is something we continue to struggle with. Consistency is another trouble spot. Any suggestions for addressing these issues?

Answer:

Traditionally, many managers have used their roles to “keep score” of how individuals are doing. The manager sets the bar at a certain height, and if the employee doesn't reach it, some kind of managerial action is taken, often in the form of: gotcha!

Sophisticated managers, though, do their managing at the seams—the places where people and workflows have to connect. They aren't trying to find out what people aren't doing — they're looking for flaws in the system as a whole.

This is especially true for managers who monitor performance across functional areas, as in the oversight of cross-functional work teams. These managers must look for work process inefficiencies or breakdowns. They must fix the system before they fix the people.

It is increasingly common these days for teams to be composed of workers from different specialties. A cross-functional team is a work group comprised of workers from different specialties. Typically, they come from the same organizational level. They come together to accomplish some specific task in which they all have a stake.

The purpose of the cross-functional team is to get workers from different specialties to blend their talents toward accomplishing a task that requires such a mix. A typical application would be to engage in the mapping and improvement of the process used for some product. Among the specialties needed on such a team might be computer science, engineering, manufacturing, industrial design, marketing and finance.

When members from different specialties work together, they can take into account each other's perspectives when making their contributions. For example, if the manufacturing representative knows that the product must sell for a certain price, then he or she will have to build the device so that it meets that parameter.

A major advantage of cross-functional teams for product development is that they enhance communication across groups, saving time along the way.

To perform well, cross-functional teams must be comprised of people who are able to think in terms of the good of the larger organization, rather than in terms of his or her own specialty. For example, “If I proposed this, would it help or hinder the effort we are making in this process improvement activity?”

Here are five important team skills that must be present for an effective cross-functional team:

1. Communication - Speak effectively. Foster open communications. Listen to others. Deliver presentations. Prepare

written communication.

2. Self-management - Act with integrity. Demonstrate adaptability. Engage in personal development. Strive for results. Display a commitment to work.

3. Problem solving / decision-making - Innovate solutions to problems. Use sound judgment. Analyze issues. Think outside the box.

4. Organizational - Know the business. Use technical/functional expertise. Use financial/quantitative data.

5. Strategic - Recognize big-picture impact. Employ systems thinking. Promote corporate citizenship. Focus on customer needs. Commit to quality. Manage profitability.

As mentioned above, one of the important activities that cross-functional teams pursue is process mapping and improvement. Process mapping is appropriate under any of the following four scenarios: A new product or process improvement has been authorized; the existing activities being undertaken are causing difficulty; the existing activities are too narrowly focused; or a need exists to reassess performance.

One way in which process mapping might be pursued with these scenarios is as follows:

- **Identify boundaries** - State the boundaries of the process, the arbitrary start and end-points that define the beginning and end of the process. The ending boundary may be the delivery of the product to the customer.
- **Identify chunks** - List the high-level “chunks” or groups of activities that define the overall steps of the process or service delivery. As a rule of thumb, create

five to seven “chunks.”

- **Identify inputs** - List the materials, equipment, information, ideas, people, money, etc., required to carry out the process.
- **Identify outputs** - State the product or service that is created by the process; that which is handed off to the customer.
- **Identify customer(s)** - List the customers for your output. In other words, who uses your product or service? Customers can be internal or external. They may use your output as input to their own processes.
- **Identify requirements** - List your customer’s requirements—what your customer needs, wants and expects of your output. Customers generally express requirements around the characteristics of timeliness, quantity, fitness for use, ease of use and perceptions of value.
- **Identify process participants** - List the roles of the participants who actually do the steps of the process, rather than just the person who is responsible for the process, such as the process owner/manager.
- **Identify process owner** - The person who is responsible for the process and the output. This person speaks for the process in the organization.
- **Identify tools and technology** -

List the tools and technology used at each high-level “chunk” or step of your process/service overview. This can include documents (electronic or paper) associated with the activity or step, e-mail, Web use, special tools, software, etc.

By following these steps, teams can outline a process, activity or service area. Subsequently, they can analyze and redesign it in greater detail.

By attending to these issues, managers can help their teams to see their work from an holistic perspective — a whole comprised of component parts or steps. This provides for coordination. Attending to these issues also helps teams develop a common set of skills that generalizes across projects. This provides for consistency.

Focus on developing team-based and process-oriented skills, and your teams will move to a higher level of performance.



Daniel Schroeder, Ph.D., of Organization Development Consultants Inc. (ODC) in Brookfield, provides “HR Connection.” Small Business Times readers who would like to see an issue addressed in an article may reach him at (262) 827-1901, via fax at (262) 827-8383, via e-mail at schroeder@odcons.com or via the internet at www.odcons.com.