No one is as smart as everyone – a Japanese proverb: The story of a high-performing work team

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Abstract

In 1998 a rapidly growing manufacturing company hired a new Vice President of Operations. While his responsibilities were very traditional, as one of his "duties as assigned" he was privileged to lead a work team that promoted and installed what was to be called the "Employee Ownership Program". This case study is written from the perspective of the team leader and done after interviewing all the team members and reviewing the documentation supporting the team's activities.

Key Words: Leadership, Team Development, Empowerment, Work Cohorts

Introduction

Teams are the leaders of the 21st century. Almost nothing grows in the direction of simplicity; chaos is necessary to new creative ordering (Wheatley, 2000, p. 13). In short, the world is too complex to think that one person can make sense of the chaos that Margaret Wheatley refers to in her book – "*Leadership and the new science: Discovering order in a chaotic world*". The need for collaboration, teamwork, and an understanding of the unique perspectives of our progressively more diverse society is increasingly critical to success. Leadership is not a solo act; it is a team effort.

This case study looks at the critical events involving a small team structure that created a high-performing work team within a large multi-departmental organization. It is of interest because of the team's success, the unique events involved, the creative people who were on the team, and the characteristics that defined the team and generated its powerful work environment. This case study is meant to help answer how and why this team was a success (DeChurch, Mesmer-Magnus, 2010).

Background

The story is auto-ethnographic, an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural within team dynamics of an organization (Humphreys, 2005, p. 840). Because the story is auto-ethnographic, it is constructed from interpretations of the personal observations of the team leader, information gathered from interviews with the team members as well as the executive sponsor and study of substantial documentation supporting the project.

Larson and LaFasto (2001) emphasize the crucial need for clarity concerning goals and principles surrounding the establishment of successful teams. They write:

> Our sample was relatively small (31 interviews covering more than 75 teams), but very diverse. Therefore, it was surprising to find that in every case, without exception, when an effectively functioning team was identified, it was described by the respondent as having a clear understanding of its objective. (p. 27)

The seminal and defining meeting for this project occurred shortly after the team members were identified. This session, the first of many organizational meetings, was attended by the chief financial officer (CFO) and the chief legal counsel as well as three members of the team. They discussed the challenges ahead of them and the resources needed to complete the project. Although the team members had outlined the goals and objectives several times in casual conversations, and generally agreed on some of the details during this meeting, the CFO made sure the team understood his instructions. The team had one year to publicly register the company and two years to create, develop and sell the program to the 6,000 employees of the company. In true nature manufacturing fashion, he left it up to the team to organize themselves and bring in additional team members that might be needed, with one caveat: any team built would be a "virtual team." By "virtual team," he meant that everyone on the team would report to the team leader via a dotted line and would be drawn from other parts of the company. This requirement really meant that the team members would retain their primary duties and would effectively be part-time members of the team working on this project.

After delivering these instructions, he left the room for another meeting, leaving the three-team members with the chief legal counsel to contemplate how they could successfully complete such a daunting project with part-time employees. While everyone wanted to make a good impression on their new employer, they were all experienced enough to know what Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) registration really meant and the challenges they had in front of them. Although they had the support of the organization, the ability to pull in the right people to make the team a success, seemingly a clear understanding of the goals and objectives – they were still concerned.

Context: The Supportive Organizational Environment

> Broadly, organization environment is the psychological atmosphere that emerges from the way an organization conducts itself. The environment is never neutral. It has compelling content. It shapes our ideas and perspectives. It can promote openness or silence. It can encourage risk taking or risk aversion. It can allow for differences or require sameness.– Frank LaFasto and Carl Larson, When Teams Work Best, 2001, p. 158

Often companies have organizational structures that overwhelm the best of intentions (LaFasto & Larson, 2001, p. 157) and management cultures that do not support teams – but "group effectiveness" (Katzenbach & Smith, 2003, p. xiv). In the United States, this is especially true, given the emphasis on strong personal and political freedoms which are counter to building a team culture (Manz & Sims, 1993, p. 17). While some refer to it as the "fuzzy factor" (Larson & LaFasto, 1989; p. 109), the supportive atmosphere of the organization was critical to the success of the employee-ownership team.

Nature manufacturing is a 50-year-old company that makes plumbing products and tools. The original founders, rich in technical knowledge, dialogued about their plans to build the company while severing as privates in the various theaters of WWII. Through a series of letters and discussions the three partners created a plan to develop a business with creative, innovative people that had a strong sense of values.

Believing that culture was critical to the development and success of the company the original owners focused on it, constantly referring to culture in speeches and internal communications. In addition they insisted that it be discussed as part of any training programs the employees were sent to. The drive to develop a strong culture eventually led to the company motto: "Do good work, have fun, and make money."

As part of the celebrated culture, the company always believed that sharing the wealth was critical to the success of the firm. The philosophy was simple; given that the employees create the profits, a large part of that wealth needs to be returned to the team – in this case via increase in the value of the stock. Another way of understanding this concept is that they are building a company where what is good for the shareholders, is good for the company and good for the employees – everyone wins.

In support of employee ownership there is a growing and substantial body of research that builds on this idea. In the book *In the Company of Owners* (Blasi, Kruse, & Bernstein, 2003) the authors report that "there is compelling evidence that broad-based employee ownership does in fact produce more value for shareholders" (p. xi). Blasi goes on to examine many facets of broad-based employee ownership, arguing that it creates a focus on long-term corporate stability and a less autocratic corporation that is far less likely to breed executive malfeasance (p. xv). To quote Henry Ford, "No one is apathetic, except those in pursuit of someone else's goals." At Nature Manufacturing having employees own a large part of the company was critical to their innovative and creative success and a way to maintain the collaborative culture.

With the Company growing rapidly and on sound financial footing, several senior officers were hired to bring broader experiences to the business and to help explore ways to expand and develop the culture of employee ownership. Several of these new hires became members of this high performing team and committed to the concept of employee ownership.

The Team

> A team is 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. — Jon Katzenback and Douglas K. Smith, The Wisdom of Teams, 2003, p. 158

A successful team begins with the right people (LaFasto & Larson, 2001, p. 1). In the survey Larson and LaFasto (2001) present in *Teamwork: What Must Go Right, What Can Go Wrong*, the factor designated as the most critical determinate of success was choosing the right team members (p. 59). In the end, a team's performance is defined by both individual efforts and collective work-products, and the first step in that process is choosing technically competent people.

There were six members of the original team that designed and installed the program. Each came to the team with unique technical expertise and insights into the organization. Four members of the team were hired just prior to beginning the project and two had been with the company for a number of years, one for 12 years, and the other for more than 25 years. They also represented different departments of the organization, including Treasury, Accounting, Legal, Human Resources, and Information Technology.

Another member of the team rarely attended the meetings but was critical to success: an executive vice-president of the company. He reports directly to the chairman and was a member of the Executive Leadership Team, which consists of the chairman and presidents of the three major operating groups.

The executive sponsor selected the team members entirely for technical reasons; the team needed an SEC-qualified accountant, an attorney, and a finance person to lead the project. His multiple years of experience with publicly traded companies and work with Wall Street played a crucial role in his selection of team members. He knew what critical skills were needed to complete the project (Larson & LaFasto, 2001, p. 62). Without this technical expertise, it would have difficult to bring this project to a successful conclusion.

The Team Leader

The role of the leader in the small group tends to be exaggerated (Burns, 1979, p. 290). There is a traditional leadership theory that says the appointed leader is a legitimate authority figure and acts like the boss, but it does not apply to the unique situation of a self-managed team (Manz & Sims, 1993, p. 55). Team leaders genuinely believe they do not have all the answers (Katzenbach & Smith, 2003, p. 131).

Sometime during this first meeting, the Operations Manager volunteered to be the team leader. Although no one on the team remembers how or why this happened, it turned out to be a unique choice. Since, according to LaFasto and Larson (2001) in their book *When Teams Work Best*, “team problem solving is not harmony, but constructive integration of diverse perspectives” (p. 66), the VP Operations generalist background played an important role in resolving disputes and negotiating between team members.

The selection as leader also turned out to be a good choice because of his passion for the project. While he had no previous experience with employee ownership, over time he began to understand what a powerful tool this structure could be in developing and growing a company. The concept that those who created the value (the employees) would receive the value created (increase in share price) simply began to make sense to him. While everyone eventually felt that a spike in profits could be attributed to the Employee Ownership Program, the immediate success showed up in an annual employee survey which reported that employees felt good about the products delivered and enjoyed working at Nature. They also reported that they were very optimistic about the company’s future.

The VP Operations leadership position was also unusual in other ways. While he set the agenda, managed the budget, and took primary responsibility for keeping the executive sponsor up to date, it often seemed in the meetings that the leadership position was transferred from one member to another. If the team faced a significant accounting issue, the accountant would take the lead; if the team had a significant legal issue, the lawyer would take over, and, for a period of several weeks when the team was building the technology that supported our effort, the IT expert was the leader.

While all considered him the formal leader and allowed him latitude to see the project through to completion**,** he was not a conventional leader, but rather what Manz and Sims (1993) describe as a *coordinator* (p.55), a person who creates an environment of trust and confidence so that the team members can collectively move the project forward.

Organizing the Team

At the broadest level, processes are the nervous system of an organization, the location where the talent, tasks, and information are used to produce an outcome (LaFasto & Larson, 2001, p. 175). When teams first come together, ground rules, policies, and norms are created to govern the working environment (Hoy, Van Eynde, & Van Eynde, 1997, p. 103). High-performing teams develop a commitment to working relationships in which they agree on who will do particular jobs, set schedules, and determine how team membership is earned (Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 105).

While the executive sponsor had chosen the team for their technical expertise, he had no idea how they would "jell" as a team. How would they plan and organize themselves; how would they deal with the organizational stress created by this proposed change; how would they deal with the competing loyalties – they each worked for a particular group but were assigned to this "virtual team". And most important, how would they deal with the inevitable conflict that was going to occur? The first "team meeting" answered several of these questions.

Each person accepted the responsibility for ordering lunch at the meetings; everyone would have their turn. While this was a seemingly small, unimportant task, passing around the responsibility for ordering lunch established a social contract between the team that made each person a full member of the team. It would have been easy for the people with professional designations, more important titles, or outspoken personalities to place themselves above other participants, creating a more controlling environment, but no one did. The assignment also put a bit of "fun" in what was to be at times a very stress-filled environment. It created what LaFastow refers to as "a commitment of self to the project" (Larson & LaFasto, 1989, p. 76).

In a strange way, it also fostered a more creative environment. Everyone took the task to heart, ordering unusual food that demonstrated their unique heritage, exceptional understanding of caloric intake, or interest in food that was just fun. The team members began to think outside of the box, demonstrating the diversity of their backgrounds, personalities, and thinking patterns which was to be a highlight of this team's success. In the morning before a meeting, they all spent time trying to guess what was going to be served and making fun of the person who had the responsibility for selecting it. It turned out to be a hazing process that created a relaxed, comfortable, informal, and fun environment – a fertile climate for the team's success (LaFasto & Larson, 2001, p. 68).

The second decision arrived at was just as critical. They would have meetings twice a week, assign responsibilities, and expect everyone to deliver. When the team leader raised the topic of the need to be results-driven, the mood became very serious, and he found himself listening more than driving the conversation. The team made the interesting and critical decision to engage in considerable face-to-face interaction. It was an unusual commitment of time and personal resources to the project. Everyone had other jobs, and the team members reported to other bosses, but everyone would commit themselves to delivering on responsibilities to this team.

During this conversation, every team member made a comment on responsibility and making commitments. While they used different words, they each recited the obvious challenges we faced almost as if they were chanting a mantra. But then, they reached a higher level of understanding as each member went into the benefits of the change they were working toward and its emphasis on sharing the wealth. The whole team decided when, where, and how to meet; it turned out to be one of the few times that a meeting ended on a very serious note. The team was deeply committed to its purpose, goal, and approach, and the members began the process of being very committed to each another.

The personal dedication of the team members was demonstrated in many ways, but most obviously reflected in the time invested. On most days, several of them would work well into the evening, and often the only cars in the lot would belong to team members. At first, as a good deed, but later as a running joke, the team leader would often stop by members' cars and knock the snow off the windows.

Although the entire team was making the project successful, everyone pointed to the team leader as the reason for success. As Katzenback and Smith (2003) suggest, most people overestimate the leader's role and responsibilities (p. 133). While he went out of his way to make sure the benefits and contributions of each team member were known – putting their names on the opening slide at board presentations, making sure everyone's name was on memos updating executive management, and making sure that their participation was highlighted in their annual reviews – it never felt to him he could do enough. So at every opportunity, he would do what he could, including knocking the snow off their windows. The interesting part was that for a while no one could figure out who was doing it. At one point, it was the opening topic of a team meeting, and the leader volunteered to be the first lookout.

The team was dedicated to constant and continual communications. The team made it a priority to communicate not just among themselves but with the broader constituency. Not only did the leader have two official meetings a week, but they also had several informal meetings on specific subjects that were critical to moving the project forward. In addition, at 7 o'clock every morning, the leader briefed the executive sponsor in a meeting often attended by other team members, and every quarter, supported by a report that the entire team would review and help prepare, then the leader briefed the board of directors.

The most important thing the team did was to make sure that everyone on the team was heard (Larson & LaFasto, 1989, p. 47). The leader monitored this carefully, mediating minor disputes, making sure the quieter group members had a space to talk, and at times visiting separately with team members to counsel them on presenting issues they were passionate about.

At one of the meetings, the controller and the SEC lawyer got into a particularly difficult argument, a routine which was becoming standard operating procedure, given the tension between legal and accounting rules. The problem was that the conflict, which everyone originally felt was a healthy and important part of moving forward, was quickly developing into a dispute with very entrenched positions. The team seemed to stall for several meetings as the discussion went on but nothing was getting accomplished. The team leader met with the controller and the lawyer individually, had open discussions about the issue, and the executive sponsor did the same, but, as the weeks went by it was becoming increasingly obvious that their positions were getting farther apart and that they were both taking the dispute very personally.

No one can remember who brought it, but it is dated November 12, 1999, and it turned out to be an amazing icebreaker. It was the "Asshole Certificate." The original, which is framed on the wall in one team member's office, is a certificate suggesting that the person who receives it is being a jerk, and the team is asking them to stop playing a disagreeable role and just be themselves. At one of the meetings, the traditional argument broke out about the accounting rules and the law, and, as was becoming standard operating procedure, things quickly got personal. Out came the certificate, which was presented to each of the disputants, and the other team members asked them to sign. There was a predictably awkward moment as they both read the document, and then a burst of laughter quickly filled the air; they signed, and we were off. It turned out to be a friendly reminder that ours, the team, was a "collective effort," and, while all team members had their positions to represent, in the end, if they did not learn as a team, they would not be successful.

Over time, this certificate would be signed by everyone in the group – multiple times – and on occasion, the team would sign it in abstentia for outside advisors and others whose behavior proved challenging. When each person was presented with the document, there was always that moment when you could challenge the demand to sign, grouse about how unfair it was, or declare that no one understood you, but in the end, it would provide relief. The certificate let you know that, for some reason, you were not being heard, and the frustration that you were feeling was making it more difficult to hear you. The team used this certificate to recognize the challenging situation and say they wanted to learn from you and with you – but we needed to stop conversation and start it again.

While the introduction of this certificate did not occur until several months after the meetings had started in earnest, it was the point at which the team began evolving from a working group, defined as a place for sharing information and making decisions to enhance individual performance, to a high-performance team that supported learning and success for the whole (Katzenbach & Smith, 1994, p. 92). This transition occurred as the team learned how to develop as a team and break down the psychological barriers to open-mindedness, a step that meant the team could now continually learn (Vaill, 1996, p. 80). This certificate, as silly as it seems, created a safe place in which to be told that you were wrong, or were letting your emotions get the better of you, or were just not being understood - most important, it allowed the team to go to the next level of performance.

The First Crisis

While there would be a few crises in the project, none tested the team like the first one. The nature of this project required a very deep understanding of accounting and SEC law. Because the Company had chosen a leading-edge structure, the legal and accounting work needed to be tested and retested by multiple experts. This meant they needed a strong, intensive legal and accounting partnership to advise and direct the team in activities. While on the accounting side they felt very confident in their long-standing relationship with a major firm, the legal side was much more challenging.

Prior to building the team the organization’s sponsor and the person primarily responsible for doing the initial research on the project, had hired a well known (translate that as *expensive*) law firm from Washington, DC. They were chosen on the recommendation of the only other company in the country to have implemented this type of ownership structure, and only after several other firms were interviewed and it became obvious that the new structure was foreign to most legal consultants. In other words, it appeared that this was law firm could give the team a real jumpstart on the project.

While the firm’s work prior to the formation of the team was minimal, they did recognize they would receive a substantial fee (approximately $1 million). With this in mind, and understanding the business opportunity, they developed a working relationship with the company’s executive management and began to help define the project - a process which set expectations and focused everyone’s efforts.

As the team initially came together, they recognized the firm's experience and worked hard to integrate them into the sessions. The team's shortcomings were obvious – they had no direct experience in setting up a program like this one – and wanted an experienced firm to help the team understand the basics, help the team build a written plan, and introduce the team to the other company that had made the same transition. They were all desperate to gain knowledge and to find out what specific roles each person would be playing in this project, and using this firm's experience seemed the most productive way to achieve those aims.

The firm and the team decided the best way to proceed was by holding a kick-off meeting. The accountants, the law firm, and the team would get together to introduce themselves and to review responsibilities. The meeting started with an air of excitement, as most projects do, and opened with a brief presentation by the team, focusing on what the team knew so far; then the accountants went next. The law firm was scheduled to present last, thinking that they would give an overview of their experience with internal market structures and act as the "teacher" for most of the meetings.

While their presentation was helpful, it displayed a bit of arrogance. Everyone seemed to notice this attitude, and, while not overtly offensive, the presentation appeared to minimize the technical expertise and experiences others brought to the table. It also appeared that the partner did not have the depth of understanding that everyone thought he had. The partner referred to another partner, who was available for consultation but too busy for our project, as the one that had done the legal work at the other company. Furthermore, the presenter gave only superficial responses to several of our questions.

These shortcomings raised a red flag, and although the team did not overreact, they did talk about their concerns at the next weekly meeting. The team all decided to have the lawyer who was on the team talk with the assigned partner, giving them some feedback on their presentation and asking more about their experience and exactly what the rules were for working with the more experienced partner.

As the weeks went by and the team's interface with the firm continued, it became obvious to everyone that the relationship was not working. The responsible partner was hard to contact; he constantly postponed answering the team's questions, and in the end the team talked more with the experienced partner than with the representative one. Aside from the obvious disappointment, the bills were outrageous. Both partners were billing at an astronomical rate, and the company was not going to come anywhere near its legal budget if this continued.

The next few meetings focused on this challenge. The team wanted to fire the only people who had real experience on a project of this type – the firm hired by the executive sponsor. The group debated and discussed the risk of taking this step, with the lawyer on the team leading the conversation. The leader's job was to make sure everyone was heard. The debate focused on the many risks of making this dramatic move and the unusual challenges the team would face in accomplishing the goals. While it would have been easy to force the decision back on to the lawyer – but no one did. Everyone was going to make the decision on the outside legal team.

With the decision in place to hire another firm, the team made an appointment with the executive sponsor and everyone helped build a presentation. While the leader flipped through the PowerPoint slides at the meeting, outlining the reason for the change and the plan for moving forward, each team member added important points and helped define the leader's words. As the presentation ended, the sponsor asked each member if this was what they wanted to do. Each replied "yes" in a firm voice.

Analysis and Conclusions

An analysis of this case study and the literature on teams leads to some interesting conclusions.

1) Organizational environment matters; it is never neutral. Opinion surveys conducted on teams suggest that the principal reasons for team failures are organizational factors, primarily non-supportive attitudes of senior management (LaFasto & Larson, 2001, p. 157). The executive management and board of directors of Nature never failed to support this team. They did this by making sure the team had adequate financial resources, by making available the very best people for the project, and most important, by giving them immediate access and feedback on the project's progress. This support assured the team they were wrapping the program around the Company's long-term strategic plan.

2) People matter: Nobody is as smart as everybody. This project crossed organizational lines, integrating accounting, the legal department, treasury, operations, marketing and communications, and the technology area. Each team member represented the unique perspective of one of these departments; each member used that expertise and insight to play a unique role in helping to weave the multiple objectives of these departments into the single project goal. Had any one of the team members been left out, the project's success would have been in question.

3) Communicate, communicate, and communicate. The team members all agree that the most critical and important decision made was to meet twice a week. As a result of this team-member commitment, they never had time to let the inevitable disagreements and conflicts simmer or get out of control, no project deliverable could get seriously behind, and most important, they had a chance in a comfortable, safe environment to challenge underlying project assumptions. The team learned and advanced thinking in every meeting.

In its own unusual and quirky way, this high performing team learned how to reach beyond self and build meaning out of a collective purpose. In the interviews, team members expressed this concept when they talked about "doing more," "creating lasting value," "rising above it all"; it is what Peter Drucker says reaffirms that we are not just biological, or psychological, but also spiritual beings (Beatty, 1998, p. 98). This evolved sense of purpose is what took the team to the next level of performance – from simply being a "team" to being a "high-performing team" that exceeded everyone's expectations.

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