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Building Process Centricity into the Team Infrastructure

The Value and Implications of Team Reflection on Process

By Carolin Rekar Munro

WHEN POSTULATING THE reason for high performance in teams, organizations credit the team's skilful management and execution of assigned tasks, yet often fail to acknowledge how management of their process may have been an equally contributing factor in the team's success. Organizations claim that team effectiveness is contingent upon the integration of task and process, but are puzzled by how process orientation affects team functioning. The process, encompassing a rich and complex synthesis of group dynamics, including interpersonal relationships, conflict management and resolution, problem-solving; and decisionmaking, remains the vast unknown with limited research to substantiate its role and value in how teams function.

Allen (1998) states that "our unquestioning belief in the value of teams has meant that we have placed very few

demands on researchers to examine the complexity of teamwork" (p. 2), with Gadenken (2002) claiming that what we know about teams is based on anecdote. According to Burke (2004), we need to deepen our comprehension of and skill in how to integrate task and process in order to sustain high performance teams. In the teamwork equation, comprehending the process continues to be one of the most perplexing issues.

Organizations in fiercely competitive, profit-driven industries are more inclined to devalue the process as the link between process centricity and productivity is blurred. They stretch to comprehend how process orientation is integral to team functioning—and ultimately, productivity—and hence, refrain from hypothesizing how the process fits into the formula for organizational success. Completing tasks according to stan-

dards and meeting stringent deadlines are paramount to their profit gains and organization viability leaving process to occupy a backseat—if occupying any role at all. Teams typically become entrenched in their daily activities battling deadlines and constant change, and consequently, little if any collective consultation takes place about their process until performance is severely skewed (Rekar Munro, 2001). According to Laiken (2002), a lack of skill in conducting process-oriented discussions is equally accountable for the almost exclusive focus on task completion within organizational teams.

With time constraints and burgeoning operational demands, the complexities of this illusive area may be too daunting to conceptualize and as a result organizations may choose to circumnavigate process in favor of task. Without process given due consideration, there is a risk of discarding an ingredient of team functioning that differentiates standard from exemplary performance, and ultimately affects an organization's longevity.

STUDY BACKGROUND

This article documents team experiences with reflection on their process, including its value and implications, and proposes strategies for process management. It is anticipated that these experiences will be of interest to new and seasoned OD practitioners.

For the new practitioner it might engage reflection and discussion about the intricate balance of task and process, and for some, might activate an interest in beginning their own investigative inquiry into effective approaches for guiding teams in managing their process. The seasoned practitioner might experience a renewed interest in process reflection or continue to reflect on how they can work with their own client groups to leverage task and process orientations. Experienced practitioners may detect similarity between the experiences expressed by the teams in this study and those experienced by their own client teams. This universality raises the question regarding how we, as practitioners, can pool our resources to create best practices for guiding teams in how to manage their process. By sharing challenges and best practices, we can enhance our effectiveness in helping teams envision and work toward achieving landmark outcomes of high performance, and ultimately, add depth and breadth knowledge to an under-researched area.

This article expands on the initial study conducted by the author and reported in the *OD Practitioner* (Rekar Munro & Laiken, 2004). In the original study, a model designed to help organizations develop and sustain high performance teams was

assessed using experimental and control conditions and demonstrated quantitatively and qualitatively that helping a team to reflect on its process through an action research approach measurably increases both its productivity and member satisfaction.

Originating from this study are two lines of inquiry: 1) the longitudinal effect of reflection on process in a landscape of intense competition and change, and 2) the effect of process orientation on, not only the team as originally studied, but also management.

The team experiences presented in this article are the result of a 16-month study with 131 participants representing a variety of organization sectors: manufacturing, telecommunications, retail, distribution, and hospitality.

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TEAM EXPERIENCES WITH REFLECTION ON PROCESS

Initially, teams were skeptical about the significance of process-based discussions; reluctant to disclose perceptions of team functioning, especially since this was neither a group nor organizational norm; and anxious that discussions were impinging on production deadlines. In most cases, teams disclosed these apprehensions and elected to persevere in anticipation of valued outcomes.

As time progressed, teams noted the gradual shift in accountability for team functioning from leader dependent to interdependent. Customarily, as problems surfaced, the instinctive response was to seek supervisory advice—a product of the traditional approach to management characterized by controlling and directing employees. In weekly process meetings, teams were now charged with the responsibility of solving identified problems. Team members concurred that process-focused discussions contributed to expedient problem identification and resolution, more so than awaiting management inter-

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vention. According to one team member, "Our immediate circle of colleagues with whom we closely interact, is in the only position to offer direction that is practical and aligned with the work unit's culture and values." As these meetings became accepted avenues for airing concerns and proposing proactive solutions, members had a forum for voicing issues without allowing them to fester indefinitely and potentially derail competent and productive teams. Consequently, this relinquished energy and attention for task completion. From an OD perspective, we are reminded how each team varies in perceptions of process and how these differences should be honored and taken into consideration as we work with teams, within their own comfort level, to build an approach to managing process.

As teams persistently experimented and struggled to formulate a signature approach to process management, they gained—to varying degrees—confidence in their own team to become process-centric. Most teams eventually constructed their own distinctive set of norms and guidelines for team functioning. Some teams, however, remained doubtful for a myriad of reasons spanning personal, cultural, and deeply entrenched task-focus, and only participated in a cursory reflection of their process.

Teams struggled with collective decision-making as it historically had been leader-facilitated. In unfamiliar territory, they pooled their resources to formulate guidelines for targeting problems, debating solution strategies, and reaching consensus on the best courses of action. Teams varied in their approach to crafting a decision-making roadmap with some teams free-styling—allowing each problem to be solved in a unique manner—while other teams chose a more structured approach whereby they researched decision-making methodologies and selected that which best suited their needs. In one team, the member who raised a concern served as ad hoc leader employing personal style and approach to decision-making. The team then generated a composite of best practices based on each facilitated session which served as the team's standardized approach to decision-making.

Within the research timeframe, large scale change prevailed in the participating organizations. In an already complex business landscape, these companies were tackling mergers, downsizing, envisioning new product lines, expanding into new territories, and re-engineering operations to comply with ISO 9000 standards. In the midst of change, process-based discussions were credited with helping teams gain greater proficiency in change management. Since their reflection on process strengthened team cohesion, problem solving, and decision-making,

they were empowered to weather the hardships associated with change and, from this position of solidarity, consolidated their resources to respond. For the OD practitioner, this punctuates the significance of building a strong process foundation in order to adapt in a climate of constant change.

Process-based discussions enabled teams to more adeptly decipher fact from fiction in that they exchanged factual information before grapevine rumors ran rampant and poisoned perceptions and responses. When organizational communiqué was remiss, some teams resourcefully consulted senior management to acquire information and seek clarification. Consequently,

within this knowledge-sharing environment teams reported less apprehension and more control over change knowing they could access valid and timely data and respond collectively, instead of braving individual isolation and powerlessness that often ensues when change descends on organizations.

Individual accountability was also an emergent theme. As teams dialogued, members contemplated their individual role and contribution to team functioning—some members publicly disclosing; others privately reflecting. Personal goals paralleling collective aspirations were set in an individual effort to cultivate harmonious and collaborative working relationships. With heightened cognizance of how their values and behavior shaped team functioning, members more assertively pursued goal setting and gauging the ramifications of their actions—

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a system characterized by one participant as "self-surveillance." Personalized goal setting was perceived by some members as more developmentally enriching than the goal setting mechanism tied to performance management systems. As we work with our client teams, practitioners are invited to consider how they might best meet the developmental needs of both the team and individual members.

Laying the foundation for process management was cited as valuable grass roots training for members aspiring to leadership. Acquired was first-hand experience of challenges inherent in process reflection and how teams experiment with an array of approaches to process before carving out that which fits the team and its culture. With these insights, members transition to leadership roles with heightened awareness of, sensitivity to, and patience with the exploratory—and often times uncertain—path en route to discovering how to manage team functioning. Direct involvement enabled them to begin formulating their own eclectic leadership style to support team progress toward self-management. This is grounds for considering how the inclusion of process orientation into formal leadership training pro-

grams might be a value-added initiative.

One team, in a technologically sophisticated service industry dominated by e-communication, preferred to investigate process on-line. With flexible work arrangements, shift work, and telecommunication as the job design configuration, their team rarely convened in person and, for research purposes, wanted to replicate the realities of their daily functioning. Unveiled were mixed reactions to on-line process management with some members condoning its effectiveness in permitting the scrupulous crafting of responses prior to sending correspondence, and allowing each member to own the spotlight during discussions without any interruptions—which is not always the etiquette of in-person meetings. Others criticized both the stagnant exchange of information, notably when members composed lengthy commentary, and the on-line traffic jams that prevailed when members simultaneously attempted to respond to emotionally-charged topics. Also observed was how anonymity could be preserved during on-line communiqué, hence evading personal accountability for managing team process. In face-to-face discourse, one's abstention would be more readily detected and confronted.

Before ruling on the validity of on-line process management, further research is needed. Given the proliferation of technology, investigation is warranted in how e-communication channels can be strengthened to promote open and active process-based inquiry.

As teams evolved in their ability to leverage task and process, they experienced a heightened sense of ownership and accountability that extended from team functioning to general business operations. Realizing, after successfully developing an approach to managing their process, that they possessed the knowledge, resources, and confidence to self-direct, they deliberated on how to transfer this expertise to self-managing task completion. Specifically, they contemplated how their best practices for raising issues, determining the "best fit" solution strategy, consensus-reaching, and assessing progress, could be transported into a model for managing business operations. In doing so, teams were earmarking standardized protocol for task and process management which could economize time during the preliminary structuring of new project initiatives and help members prepare their meeting contributions within the established guidelines. However, this is not intended to be a prescriptive approach for all teams. Since teams are divergent in composition, culture, experience, expertise, and personality, they should reflect on their own unique functioning and sculpt an appropriate response to its management.

SUPERVISORS' EXPERIENCES WITH TEAM REFLECTION ON PROCESS

Front-line supervisors reported changes in their roles and responsibilities attributable to the integration of process management into team operations. Prior to teams seizing the reins

of responsibility, supervisors controlled and directed all business activities, including the process—if acknowledged at all. With process management transferred to teams, supervisory governance in this area gradually diminished, but was superseded by a more strategic mandate.

Initial supervisory reaction to teams managing their process was fraught with apprehensions about value, effect on productivity, time commitments, and employee competence. Buried beneath these queries—unmasked after the study—was reaction driven by fear, ego, and need for power and control. With teams commissioned to manage process, supervisors feared fewer employees would call upon them to "rescue" or "fight the fires of office politics." The diminishing power base was especially disconcerting as it leveled the playing field with employees who were now gaining expertise, and exercising self-sufficiency, in a domain once owned and controlled exclusively by management. With power perceived as the defining characteristic in the leadership profile, supervisors equated its loss with dwindling professional and personal value. Awareness of management response, invites OD practitioners to consider how they can best counsel management to help them comprehend and adapt to this changing role.

Supervisors initiated their own personal reflection on the implications of this transition. Revealed was that they were gradually expending less time on operational affairs leaving more time for strategic planning—the blueprint for high performance organizations. With teams handling the process, supervisors could concentrate on charting new initiatives to achieve and sustain competitive advantage. Uncovered was more time to plan and execute market research—which, for many supervisors, had been shelved in its conceptual stage for lack of time—and to network with clients to forge business partnerships vital to securing organizational presence on the global front. By steering in a strategic direction, supervisors were transitioning from operational management to strategic leadership which more closely aligned them with core organizational mandates.

Also traced was the transformation in supervisory leadership style from a directive approach, to a coaching capacity, and then to an advocacy role. As teams progressed toward autonomy and self-reliance, there were corresponding changes at the supervisory level. Initially, as teams were settling into new communication and behavioral patterns, supervisors, as coaches, were available to address "start up" issues and to provide counsel—without, however, obstructing preliminary mapping of team direction. Given initial team reservations, especially regarding production deadlines, supervisors were called to abate concerns and, with a few well-positioned questions, refocus teams to process orientation. As teams became self-sustaining, supervisors were consulted less frequently and moved into a supporting role from which they periodically checked-in with teams to provide encouragement and offer guidance. For some supervisors experiencing the gravitational pull back to directive leadership, teams swiftly interjected and clarified that they were en

route to establishing the parameters for team functioning and would request supervisory intervention if needed.

In the coaching capacity, supervisors grasped the role they played in propelling teams from leader-dependent to interdependent. They discovered that teams do not automatically leap into self-management, but require a network of resources, guidance, and support in order to evolve as self-directed. As noted by Laiken (1994), "one of the most important contributions made by a facilitative leader is the role he or she plays as the team struggles with the conflict that is inevitable in the process of group maturation" (p. 33). This heightens the significance of coaching as part of leadership development programs and the need to work with managers to set personal goals to become fully functioning in this leadership mode.

Participation in team meetings every three weeks was favored by supervisors as a means of staying connected. Although members could freely interact with supervisors, these tri-weekly sessions embedded regular communication channels into business practice. Supervisors remained current regarding team initiatives, achievements, and challenges, and teams could requisition resources such as financial assistance for training or, in a few cases, third party mediation to resolve conflicts that were threatening to polarize teams.

These meetings also afforded occasions for supervisors to seek feedback on their leadership and their working relationships with teams. They were curious to hear how they contributed to team progress and what they needed to do differently to developmentally support teams. Emergent themes included: team appreciation for the freedom to manage process, yet management being readily available for consultation; and acknowledgement of how supervisors refrained from imposing time restrictions on meetings so teams could exercise their own judgment as to when meetings convened and adjourned. Constructive feedback included requests for some supervisors to abstain from offering unsolicited advice, especially when teams were entrenched in problem solving. Supervisors defended these actions by explaining the inherent difficulties in abandoning their instinctive need to rescue teams, especially when solutions were apparent. This open critique gave voice to their experiences so that they could celebrate their successes and take corrective action to minimize barriers in their working relationships.

Changes in the supervisor-team working relationship were also detected with traditional employee subordination to management replaced with what supervisors coined a "business partnership." With teams extending skill mastery from process to task management, they became more astute about business operations and confident in proposing suggestions of a strategic nature. Dialogue between both parties centered on strategic advancements with a shared sense of accountability and ownership in the planning and implementation of change. They were establishing and leveraging partnering champions who shared goals and worked collaboratively to build high performance work cultures. With emergent partnerships, OD practi-

tioners are encouraged to examine how they might work with both parties to facilitate the development of collegial working relationships.

Sharing strategic leadership and partnering to reach organizational goals may have attributed to the decrease in formal complaints and grievances filed. Preliminary trend analyses revealed a decline in employee-generated grievances targeting supervisory wrongdoing. The results are preliminary with organizations continuing to monitor trends in order to ascertain statistical validity and reliability and to calculate financial benefits reaped from declining grievance rates.

On the brink of a major demographic shift, with Baby Boomers retiring and both Generation "X" and the "Net" Generation dominating the employment scene, team responsibility for managing process appears to be ideally positioned. The new workforce, characterized as entrepreneurial and independent (Izzo, 2002), reject micromanagement and prefer organizations grounded in empowerment and collaboration. Given this profile, organizations are called to review and restructure work assignments so that teams are accountable for the management of their process and tasks. In doing so, organizations enhance the probability of attracting and retaining the "new" talent pool who are inclined to establish their own business rather than work within established, high control bureaucracies.

INTEGRATION OF PROCESS CENTRICITY INTO THE ORGANIZATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

With results supporting the significance of team reflection on process, organizations are encouraged to build process orientation into their architecture. Fundamental to the acceptance and viability of process centricity is leadership commitment to and cultivation of a climate that values and practices process management. As a preliminary step, mission and value statements should embrace the process from which policies and procedures can be structured to move the theoretical underpinnings of process management into practice.

Launching and sustaining this initiative are equally dependent on professional development. Staff participating in departmental and cross-functional teams may benefit from process-based training as it frames their collaboration within the new organizational context. Initially, through a semi-structured approach such as the team development model (Rekar Munro, 2001), basic guiding principles that shape the integration of process with task are introduced. As teams hone process management to align with team culture and structure, supplementary training for unique developmental needs may become evident. Parallel to the team's developmental track is management training in how to adapt one's style to accommodate team progress toward self-leadership.

Coordinating the potentially vast array of training requests requires a mechanism for tracking and managing training. A database to house such information may, over time, reveal

trends and patterns pointing toward standard training itinerary for management trainees and newly formed teams.

En route to leveraging process with task teams may challenge organizational paradigms, norms, and operating procedures. If management remains supportive and flexible—granting autonomy to self-correct—teams approach their development with unbridled curiosity and creativity from which more efficient and effective collaboration may evolve. Consequently, the outcome may emerge as a benchmark standard of excellence for other teams. Not implying that teams progress along identical paths, but role model teams may inspire others to approach their own process with openness, knowing there are infinite possibilities to be explored. Opportunities should be forged for these high performance teams to dialogue with and perhaps mentor teams that are struggling to manage their process.

The final ingredient in integrating process into the organizational infrastructure is the inclusion of assessment to gauge its value. Teams are encouraged to break from weekly process meetings to reflect on their progress from a macro perspective, including major developmental trends and shifts in team functioning; challenges faced and how they were resolved or remain works-in-progress; and goal setting to position for the future. In doing so, teams gain a broad perspective of their functioning and can ascertain if the direction they are taking is enhancing team development or needs to be revisited.

Periodically, management should connect with teams to support progress and to dialogue about the management-team alliance. Since these meetings are also a forum for teams to air their concerns regarding leadership and organizational supports and constraints, problems may be more expeditiously rectified before threatening to dismantle working relationships and short circuit the team's collective strength to complete tasks. By sustaining open and unfiltered channels of communication, both parties can articulate their experiences and perceptions, and strategize ways to enhance their partnership.

Personal reflection by each team member may also be advantageous alongside collaborative inquiry as it invites members to assess critically their value-added contribution to team functioning. Quinn (1996) advocates that, in order to achieve excellence, teams must commit to ongoing experimentation, reflection, and evaluation.

CONCLUSION

As teams continue to be a significant force in the race for competitive advantage, OD practitioners are called to continu-

ally reflect on and develop more effective ways to help client teams optimize performance. En route to creating empowered, functional teams practitioners are invited to explore the integration of process with task as a key ingredient in developing and sustaining high performing teams. The team experiences presented in this article substantiate the value and implications of process management and propose a path for practitioners to take as they work with their client teams to extend process-centricity into the organizational infrastructure. Through process management, practitioners can help build the knowledge, skill, and confidence of teams so that collectively they can navigate through the turbulence, uncertainty, and fluidity of change. Building a process-centric, team-based work environment positions organizations to compete in an unpredictable and unprecedented landscape of change. ■

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