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Does Your Team have Solid Structures?

Just as a building's structure creates support for activities to occur within the building, so too do team structures create support for a team's activities that help it accomplish its goals.

When most people hear the word structure, they think of organizational structure - who reports to whom. Structures are more than just hierarchy - they include all the relatively stable elements that have a significant impact on how a team functions. Structures are created when people repeat the same patterns of behavior to the point where the pattern becomes predictable.

Time and again we see the significant impact of structures on team effectiveness - and ineffectiveness. To be effective, teams need to have solid structures. Here are the key team structures. If your team is missing one or more of these critical structures, it will have a difficult time accomplishing its goals.

1. Clear and compelling purpose and vision. A clear purpose enables your team to decide whether any actions it takes and decisions it makes are consistent with that purpose. Without a clear agreed upon purpose, your team is likely to waste time and resources. From this purpose, the team sets specific goals. A vision paints a picture of what your team will look like in the future as it achieves its purpose.

2. Effective culture. Your team's culture comprises the core values and assumptions that guide team behavior. Does your team value innovation, collaboration, learning, responsibility, or other things? Your team's culture is not what your team or organization says its culture is; it's the core values that you demonstrate every day through your actions. Your team's culture determines your team's behavior - including what's possible and what's not.

3. Motivating tasks. Team members' work needs to be designed so that doing the work is itself motivating. This means designing the work so that it's meaningful, gives people autonomy, and that team can get feedback simply by doing their work, rather than having to ask others how they are doing.

4. Clear roles. If team members aren't clear about the roles they play or if they have conflicting views of their roles, work may not be accomplished, may be performed more than once, or may not be adequately coordinated. Decisions may not get made or there may be confusion about who makes what decisions.

5. Appropriate membership. Your team needs the right mix of members to accomplish its goals. Members need the knowledge and skills to perform the tasks and there needs to be enough diversity on the team so that that members' different ideas become a catalyst for innovative solutions. The team also needs to be the right size: too few members means the work can't be reasonably accomplished, too many members leads to unnecessary coordination and reduced efficiency.

6. Acceptable behaviors. Team members need a clear set of expectations about what team member

behavior is appropriate and what is not. Without a set of agreed upon norms, meetings can get off track, important issues can remain unaddressed, and members may feel their voices are not heard. These expectations stem directly from the team's culture.

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