

Self-Directed Work Teams

A Brief Description

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Self-directed work team: a group of employees who have day to day responsibility for managing themselves and the work they do with a minimum of direct supervision. Members typically handle job assignments, plan and schedule work, make production and/or service related decisions, and take action on problems. (Fisher 1992)

Faced with global competition and rapid technological change, companies are forced to develop new organizational structures to meet the challenges facing them. One alternative that has gained popularity in recent years is the team-based organization. While there are varying approaches to the designing of a team environment, one common approach is the self-directed work team (SDWT). The SDWT is responsible for a relatively whole task, not just part of a job, and each of the team members possesses a variety of skills relevant to that task. As a result, the SDWT has behavioural control and decision-making autonomy at the work group level (Manz 1992). This increase in autonomy, however, does not preclude the need for leadership and direction. Two very important roles in the SDWT are the team leader and the team facilitator.

The Team Leader

While the research on SDWTs indicates that teams need a leader, it does not agree on the exact role of the leader. Some research suggests that the leader be freely chosen among team members, and change as new circumstances arise (Bower 1997). Other research suggests that the position be permanent, or be rotated every four to six months (Wellins, Byham, and Wilson 1991). Depending on the organization, moreover, the team leader may take on slightly different roles, for example:

- The team leader may spend time performing various production or service tasks and also help the team accomplish its leadership responsibilities.
- The team leader may act as a spokesperson for the team, coordinate different activities with other departments and teams, and train new team members.
- The team leader may take on a role of 'internal facilitator' by helping the team reach a consensus on how the leadership responsibilities will be divided among the whole team. (Wellins, Byham, and Wilson 1991)

While there is no agreement on the exact role of the leader within the SDWT, the literature does agree that a leader should be chosen from the team members and that the leader is on a level equal to that of the other members.

The Team Facilitator

In addition to the team leader, the SDWT usually has one member who acts as a team facilitator, coach, mentor, or group leader (there is no universal term for this role). The role of this individual

combines some of the responsibilities assumed by the traditional first-level supervisors with those of middle managers. Leaders at this level usually have large spans of control, sometimes ranging over 100 team members (Wellins, Byham, and Wilson 1991, 38). This role is usually one of coordination and collaboration, i.e. getting a group of employees to function as a decision-making body (Holpp 1997). It may include

- helping the team address issues;
- coaching and training team members;
- helping team members develop skills;
- serving as the contact point for suppliers;
- helping teams gain access to the resources and training that are needed for success;
- filling in when team members are absent or during peak demand periods;
- helping teams coordinate efforts with other teams and other units within the organization;
- helping the team meet its goals. (Isgar, Ranney, and Grinnell 1994, 46; Wellins 1992, 28)

The job competencies of the team facilitator should include individual leadership, group leadership, judgment, delegation, encouragement, and support of initiative (Wellins 1992).

Team Members

The characteristics of the SDWT have a direct impact on the role of the individual worker. The worker as part of a team 'must learn multiple jobs or tasks and take on many tasks that were reserved for supervisors or managers--including hiring, firing, conducting appraisals, and setting schedules' (Wellins 1992, 26). The team member may need competencies in many of the following areas:

- working with others and building trust,
- identifying problems and solutions,
- taking initiative and dealing with change,
- communicating and active listening,
- setting work standards and planning,
- recognizing the efforts of others,
- coaching and training,
- motivating,
- identifying customer expectations, and
- maintaining work tempo. (Wellins 1992; Zenger et al. 1994, 164)

Although the literature once again indicates no clear consensus on job competencies for team members, there is agreement that team members are gaining job competencies relevant to not only their technical skills but also their interpersonal skills.

As organizations are moving towards team-based structures, they are recognizing that the role changes will not come naturally or without training. Workers must learn to work together as a team and to do that they need training to develop the new job competencies vital to the high-performance workplace of today (Vander Linde, Homey, and Koonce 1997; Bentley 1990).

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