

INTRODUCTION

THE OPPORTUNITY

How do you create an environment that successfully addresses the many challenges that supervisors and employees deal with while producing outstanding performance? The answer is simple: *You have to create an environment where everyone is a leader.* That is, an environment where everyone works together, takes the initiative, assumes ownership, is willing to deal with difficult issues, and accepts accountability for the team's results; an environment that is in stark contrast with one in which the supervisor tries to get everyone to produce.

This is a fundamental change in the way that most work entities operate. However, as we will show you, such a workplace design will produce better performance and make your work life much more exciting, enjoyable, and fulfilling.

You may think it sounds like a bunch of management buzzwords, concepts that are good in theory but virtually impossible to implement

in the real world. However, plenty of organizations have already redesigned their workplaces using the principles, tools, techniques, and strategies that we explain to you in this book.

THE CHALLENGE

If you are a supervisor or a team leader, you know how difficult it is to run a unit or a team. You have constant pressure to perform, frequent demands on your time, problem employees to deal with, employees or unions with their own agendas ... you get the picture.

You have the one job where everyone seems to give you a hard time—management demands improved performance, employees want you to solve their problems, the union thinks you are treating its constituents unfairly, other units need you to attend to their issues, and, by the way, your wife or husband and children would like some of your time as well. In short, you feel that the weight of the world often rests on your shoulders and you have few, if any, people to turn to for support. Deep down, you are probably saying to yourself, “There has got to be a better way.”

As a team leader or team member, you most likely have stringent performance expectations and someone frequently looking over your shoulder. On top of that, you may feel these expectations are unrealistic and were simply imposed on you by higher-ups in management that don't understand or care what you are dealing with.

You might also be feeling out of the loop and disengaged because you don't know what is really going on or what your true purpose is.

Moreover, you may believe you are merely a cog in the wheel and easily replaceable, based on the whims of your superiors.

You may not like the way you are being treated and/or the way your team is being managed. For example, you may not be treated fairly, communication might be weak, and/or you may not receive the training you need. You may also feel you are not having the type of social connection with your coworkers that you would like to have.

Alternatively, you may feel that you are a star and part of a team of stars who, like a high-powered racing car, can do much more if given the opportunity. You yearn for a way to contribute in a higher and more rewarding manner.

For all the reasons stated and more, you and your coworkers may feel disenfranchised at work; the result is low morale, turned-off employees, and, most important, poor performance. That is exactly why companies have invested millions, if not billions, of dollars in training, organizational and team development.

The challenges/problems just described, and which you are probably experiencing, are most likely caused by the traditional work structure. That structure involves units or teams of people supervised by one individual who is over his head. To make matters worse, this structure is typically supported by a series of management systems and processes that are designed to maintain that relationship and unintentionally keep *you* and others from becoming a leader.

In other words, most units/teams are designed *not to produce leaders*, which results in people thinking and acting simply as workers. Does this assessment apply to your situation? We suspect that it probably does.

INTRODUCTION

Before we go forward, we want to be clear that we are not saying it is impossible to have a successful team or unit using a traditional structure. Obviously you can. What we are saying is that with 1) all the inherent challenges that currently exist in the workplace, and 2) the expectation that things will only get more complicated, if you have a team of committed leaders, you are much more likely to have a high-performing team that will not be bogged down with all the negative issues we previously described.

Many organizations have tried to address these issues, at least to some extent, by converting to a team environment. Perhaps yours has. The degree to which this team-building effort has helped matters varies, of course, case by case. However, relatively few organizations have tried to build *teams of leaders*, believing it is unrealistic or too difficult to accomplish, or they simply didn't know how to get there. As a result, the traditional supervisor–employee relationship remains largely intact, and the aforementioned challenges have only been addressed to a limited degree, at best.

IS THERE A MODEL WE CAN USE TO BUILD A TEAM OF LEADERS?

The one we recommend is the Five-Stage Team Development Model, which is the underlying foundation of this book (our discussion of this model was influenced by the work of Carl A. Bramlette Jr. and Abe Raab). This model identifies the five distinct stages of team development. At Stage One (the way most units/teams work today), the team leader

interacts with each team member, one-on-one. The model goes on to describe how your team can evolve and grow in varying stages all the way up to Stage Five. This is the stage where the team essentially manages itself, everyone becomes a leader, and the supervisor's time is freed up to work in other areas that create more value.

Imagine being the leader of a team that is at Stage Five. Under this scenario, you would advise the team as needed but spend most of your time working on higher, cross-functional, and outside issues. Many of the problems that you typically deal with would now be handled by the team itself, freeing you up to work at a broader level.

Your relationship with the team would also be very different. Instead of being a traditional supervisor who manages people on a one-on-one basis, you would teach the team members how to handle these issues and be available to assist them as needed. Instead of being frequently bogged down and overwhelmed, you would now have the time to focus on the important issues that were often neglected.

Perhaps most important, instead of pushing and cajoling a disparate group of individuals to work on the team's goals and objectives, you will be working with energetic and motivated individuals who are leaders in their own right, and who will only occasionally turn to you for help in order to take them to the next level. They will not be a group of whiners or people looking after their own best interests. Instead, they will be a team of leaders, trying to push the envelope and striving for the best performance possible. Wouldn't that be a refreshing change?

If you are a team member, imagine what it would be like to be part of a team of leaders at Stage Five. You would be a valued member of a team that manages itself. Instead of having someone standing over you

INTRODUCTION

cracking the whip, you would now be part of a cohesive team wherein everyone holds each other accountable.

In lieu of having goals simply imposed on you, you would play an integral role in developing these goals and trying to achieve them. Instead of hoping that you get the training you need to do your job, you would be involved in developing a comprehensive training plan to both gather and disseminate critical job knowledge.

Rather than wondering where you fit in the organization, what you contribute, and what your team's purpose is, you would know exactly where you fit, understand the value you contribute, and have a clear sense of purpose.

You would also work within a framework that is clear and aligned, meaning you would receive messages that are both consistent and purposeful. Furthermore, you would work in a setting that provides a strong social network and offers you the camaraderie and support you crave. Finally, you would work in a physical environment that is both inspiring and informational and reinforces your connection to both the mission and the metrics. Wouldn't that be an amazing change from your current situation?

EXAMPLES OF TEAMS THAT HAVE SUCCEEDED AT SELF-MANAGEMENT

You're probably still wondering, "Is it possible after all? Can it work in the real world?"

Let's review two examples of organizations that converted to self-directed work teams using the Five-Stage Model. As you are reviewing these examples, compare them with the way your unit/team operates.

INTRODUCTION

The General Electric plant in Durham, North Carolina, does final assembly for the GE90 and CF34 jet engines. A *Fast Company* article, “Engines of Democracy,” pointed out that the plant’s real power lies in the way that work is performed.¹

The plant has more than 300 employees² but only one boss—the plant manager. All of these employees report to the boss, meaning that for all intents and purposes, they have no supervisor. Self-directed teams build the jet engines—teams that decide how to manage the work, how to manage time off, how to improve systems and work processes, and how to deal with problem teammates.

Pay is transparent—that is, everyone is aware of how much money others on the team make because employees are paid by their skill level, and that information is available to each employee.

The teams do not maintain a typical assembly line. Instead, they own an engine from start to finish. Moreover, everyone’s work varies on a daily basis, keeping the work interesting and resulting in a high degree of variety.

This plant has no time clock, so team members can take care of their personal business when needed. Meanwhile, the plant manager—the only supervisor in the entire plant—sits in an open cubicle in the middle of the factory floor.

As you might expect, everyone does not successfully fit into this environment, especially “people who expect to take orders.” That is because the plant was designed to be operated by teams of leaders. To put that into perspective, there’s this comment from one of the team members at the time the *Fast Company* article was written: “I have fifteen bosses ... All of my teammates are my bosses.”³

INTRODUCTION

The people in the Durham plant are clearly engaged, have high energy, possess multiple skills, and are very motivated. In addition, they take tremendous pride in their team and the work they perform. More important, the plant's performance has continued to excel and it is considered by many to be an industry leader. All of this did not occur simply by magic.

Oh, and by the way, when the GE plant first started out on its transformation effort, the plant had 175 employees. Since then, the workforce has virtually doubled and GE continues to invest in the plant. Does that sound like your current situation?

Our second example pertains to government, a sector in which change is always difficult. Both of the authors worked together on this endeavor to transform one particular organization and its teams.

Department of Veterans Affairs regional offices are responsible for adjudicating claims for veterans benefits. All told, the VA has fifty-eight regional offices across the country serving more than 24 million veterans.

In 1986, Stew became the assistant director of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs New York Regional Office (NYRO). At the time, all regional offices processed claims for benefits using an assembly-line approach, resulting in many errors, a large amount of rework, and no one really owning the claim. Moreover, teamwork was rarely emphasized since there were many specialized jobs and employees were only measured on how well they handled their small piece of the process.

From the perspective of veterans, the claims took much too long to process. (They still do, as VA has been overwhelmed with hundreds of thousands of claims from veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.) But veterans voiced other complaints as well. For example, they found it extremely difficult to find out the status of their claims, and they

did not have a central point of contact. Naturally, this situation led to a high degree of frustration and low customer satisfaction.

In 1991, a new director, Joe Thompson, arrived. He felt that the system was archaic and there had to be a better way to process claims, serve veterans, and manage the employees. Working closely with OPD (Paul's company), Thompson, along with Stew and the NYRO's staff, transformed the office from a unit-based operation to a team-based environment. Supervisors were replaced with or became coaches, and the team members received an enormous amount of technical training, as well as training on how to operate as a self-managed team.

The assembly-line process was replaced with each team owning the claims under its jurisdiction, resulting in fewer handoffs, more knowledgeable and better-developed employees, and veterans having one point of contact.

Service was measured using a balanced scorecard, which meant productivity, timeliness, and quality weren't looked at in a vacuum any longer. Along these lines, this information was posted and shared with the employees.

All processes were reviewed (e.g., the way people were interviewed, the manner in which performance was reviewed and managed, the way people were paid), and changes were made where appropriate.

The NYRO even built a museum of veterans benefits on-site, in order for employees to connect more closely to the mission. Eventually, people began to think and act differently as they evolved from being merely workers to becoming leaders.

As word spread of this transformation effort, many public and private sector organizations came to learn from the NYRO's experience.

INTRODUCTION

Eventually, its success resulted in the NYRO receiving the first Hammer Award for reinventing government from then Vice President Al Gore.⁴

Stew and many of his teammates remember this as perhaps the most magical time of their careers. People came to work excited, feeling they had been elevated, had a higher sense of purpose, and were doing something special. They worked together in a way that is rarely seen in a work setting, particularly government.

Today, roughly twenty years after that transformation effort, many of the members of the senior team keep in touch and consider each other to be lifelong friends. Wouldn't you like to feel that way about your team?

NOW WHAT?

Since most problems are caused by the way teams and their management systems and processes are *designed*, in order to address the problems once and for all, teams need to change their design. For example, if your team is designed to operate under a supervisor who is all-knowing and all-controlling, you will react accordingly. That is, you will probably overrely on your supervisor, be afraid to exercise independent judgment, not show much initiative, and be merely a follower.

If little information is shared, you will not know what value you contribute or understand the effect of your actions, in which case the unintended consequences are going to be low productivity and/or downstream errors. Meanwhile, the supervisor will have to frequently work to the point of exhaustion, since she will be trying to control the work of a group of compliant (but not committed) employees, which is a formula for mediocrity at best.

INTRODUCTION

The point here is that you get what you design for; if you want to have a team of leaders, you must design and align all your systems and processes to make that happen.

Since it probably took your team/unit a number of years to get to where it is today, expect that it will take some time, perhaps even years, before your team can become a Stage Five team. A good analogy here is weight control: Just as it takes time to gain weight, it also takes time to lose it. Moreover, unless the requisite support systems are in place (e.g., exercise, eating right, a calorie counter if necessary), you are unlikely to keep the weight off in the long run.

The same concept holds true for taking your team to Stage Five: It takes time to get there, and your transformation will only last if the necessary systems and processes are in place. However, the results will definitely make your investment of time and energy worthwhile!

So, a core principle of this book is that you should design your team for the results you want. The rest of this book will show you how to do just that.