

# Problem Solving Through Teamwork

Teamwork is acknowledged as an effective tool in many environments, particularly manufacturing. One of the difficulties in utilizing this tool is that many organizations have a problem understanding and defining what a team is. A team is a group of people learning and working together to reach specific goals and objectives in support of a common mission.

Many businesses use teamwork to improve product performance and service quality. But the basic tenets that govern successful implementation of the teamwork approach are too often ignored. The key factors in a successful teamwork project are: commitment of top management, development of the right tools, and the company's commitment to process improvement.

## The Mission Statement

The first thing management must do is produce a statement describing the mission or goal of the company. Simply distributing this statement to all the employees or putting it on a wall in the office lobby is not enough. A mission statement must be a working document. In any teamwork environment, this mission statement should be discussed at the beginning of every meeting. In this way, every meeting becomes a reminder of what all personnel and the company are trying to achieve.

All employees, from the very beginning of their careers with the company, should have a clear understanding of their roles in achieving the company's goals and objectives. This knowledge and understanding, which is imparted directly to them from management, will ultimately engender dedication from all company employees. A company's mission statement should be more than just words in a frame. It must be a living document in which employees believe they have a vested interest.

While individual commitment is essential, there is a behavioral component to teamwork which is directly linked to the team's nature as a group. The key to this behavior comes down from the upper and middle level managers. These individuals should possess a number of essential leadership characteristics:

- Enthusiasm for the company which motivates others on the team
- The courage to make difficult decisions
- Commitment to the company's mission
- An ability to maintain standards without compromise.

Employees will follow the lead of their superiors. If the above qualities are lacking in management, then its subordinates will, in most cases, fall short of the desired goals. Teamwork environments and results are only as useful as management's commitment.

## Tools

The second ingredient for effective teamwork is to select the right tools for generating the desired goals:

- Brainstorming. This is a technique for generating the greatest number of ideas or solutions. The object is to throw out as many ideas as possible, and then to pare them down into a few workable solutions. Although "brainstorming" contains an element of free association, it is important to establish strict ground rules and to give members well-defined roles in the process.
- Formal meeting model. This provides a way of purging whatever negative behavior has been fostered. The methods of achieving this end include taking minutes, setting time limits, and covering all topics on the agenda. Team meetings should be limited to those people who are impacted in some way by the issue. No one should be on a team simply because he or she has a title.
- Problem solving method. There are a number of different methods of problem solving. Whether you employ a four- or six-step process, each method generally covers the same territory. What is important is that it forces the team to follow a structure, so that when problems arise, team members are working in unison. All team members should have an understanding of the steps involved and stay with the rest of the team as it moves toward its ultimate goal.

# Problem Solving Through Teamwork (Cont'd)

## Process Improvement

The final step in achieving effective teamwork is process improvement. The key is to create a comprehensive flow chart of the production process. Each step in the production process should be outlined, detailed, and analyzed to determine what is of value and what is not.

## Case Study

A manufacturer had a government contract to produce a subcomponent of a very large and expensive system. During the course of production, the product was found to be defective. At first the production engineers were unable to discover the cause of the defect, so management put a team together to identify the problem and create a solution.

The team was comprised of members of the existing manufacturing organization, known as the core unit, as well as additional trouble-shooting partners from outside the core unit. They had a well-defined mission: to identify why a bad product was being produced and find a way to prevent it.

Eventually, the team discovered that one of their drill presses was not being recalibrated or adjusted on a regular basis, causing production errors. In addition, as the team reanalyzed the production process, they discovered a fundamental engineering design flaw. They then took this information to one of the team engineers who simply had to tighten the product specifications on one of the components.

This could have been a several hundred thousand dollar problem, but by employing the company work force in the most effective and efficient way possible, through teamwork, it was resolved very inexpensively.

## Conclusion

Without teamwork groups, organizations generally follow a top-down solving method or simply allow employees to work independently to reach a solution. This rarely works because managers are too far removed from the problem's source and individuals lack the resources cultivated in a group environment. The manufacturing process by nature involves a series of interdependent steps that culminate in the final product. By linking everyone in the chain, teamwork is clearly the best problem-solving method for manufacturers.

For this approach to be effective, the company must demonstrate its commitment to teamwork by allocating the time and resources necessary for employees to meet and work in teams.