

1.5.9: The Value of Teams in Business Communication

Learning Objectives

- Discuss the value of teams in business communication
- Discuss types of teams in organizations

You hear a lot about teams every day—sports teams, disaster and rescue teams, and medical support teams. Teams exist because they are effective in achieving goals, especially when the goal is well-defined. In the business environment, reliance on teams has been growing in the last few decades as organizations become more virtual (operating over distance) and more structurally complex. Businesses rely on teams to perform tasks not well suited to more traditional organizational structures. The most common types of teams are discussed in this section.

Business organizations have both groups and teams. A group is formed around a common interest or purpose with the goal of sharing information, but there is no collective accountability. Employee groups may consist of social clubs or volunteer efforts. A team's focus is collective performance, with both individual and mutual accountability. For example, all of the people who work in accounting constitute a group, but people from each functional department who meet regularly to standardize financial procedures are a team.

Teams bring together members of the organization with a wide variety of skills to achieve a common goal. Organizations accomplish these goals by carefully selecting the type of teams they use.

Types of Teams



Figure 1. Companies create different types of teams for different purposes.

The team is only as good as its members and the ways in which they interact with each other. Here are several types of teams that may be used in the workplace. As you read through them, consider their purpose and the likely communication issues.

Cross-Functional Teams

A **cross-functional team** is just what it sounds like—a team that pulls its members from across the different functional areas of an organization. These teams are typically permanent or long-standing. For example, cross-functional teams may be composed of representatives from production, sales, marketing, finance, and legal. The strength of this type of team lies in its members having different functional backgrounds, education, and experience. The diversity of experience contributes to innovative problem solving and decision making.

Cross-functional teams may be used to implement new solutions in the workplace. A simple example is a group of instructors who want to use grant money to purchase PCs for all four of their classrooms. In order to avoid unexpected difficulties and pitfalls, the instructors invite representatives from Campus Engineering and IT Security to join their team. Without this cross-functional team, the teachers might have overlooked the special electrical considerations of rack-mounted charging stations for the PCs or the special campus security software that must be installed. Including other departments leads to greater project success by using expertise from many areas.

Unfortunately, the very factors that give cross-functional teams strength can also lead to weaknesses. Without a strong leader and very specific goals, it may be hard to foster social cohesion in cross-functional teams and to create a system of accountability.

Task Forces

A **task force** is a group or committee, usually of experts or specialists, formed for analyzing, investigating, or solving a specific problem. Quite often, a task force is formed in reaction to a problem or specific event, and once the job is done, the task force is

disbanded. The goal of a task force is to offer solutions, support, and, if possible, put preventive measures in place against future problems.

A task force might be used to assess the causes for declining customer traffic at a store location, for example. There might be team members from marketing who analyze competitors in the areas and changes in customer preference. There might be operational members who review internal procedures related to stock management and customer interactions.

Types of concerns that may generate task forces in the workplace include bullying, health and wellness, employee training, increasing customer sales, or improving employee job satisfaction. A **project team** is similar to a task force, but a project team is often ongoing and covers a wider range of tasks.

Virtual Teams

Virtual teams are groups of individuals working together with a common purpose but in different locations. Virtual teams by definition may overlap with the team types listed above. People may be in different time zones or even different organizations. The obvious advantage of a virtual team is the low cost, both in time and money, to maintain it. Meeting in virtual space increases flexibility for team members (people can attend from wherever they are) and allows the organization to use the talent of employees around the globe.

The idea of virtual teams is relatively new; however, the use of virtual teams has grown 140 percent from 2005 to 2018.^[1] Virtual teams are possible thanks to advances in communication technology, such as e-mail, the internet, videoconferencing, and collaboration platforms, and other products.

When considering virtual teams, remember that working across cultures can be as challenging as working cross-functionally. Working with team members from different cultures means working with potentially different leadership styles and decision-making processes. In the United States, managers tend to gather data, make quick decisions, and move forward, making corrections as need. Northern Europeans prefer to build consensus slowly, whereas the French are taught to debate and confront from the time they're in primary school. Some business consultants will tell you that decisions in Japan are made in small, informal conversations before the formal meeting ever takes place. All teams need to be sensitive to these issues, which may be far more prevalent among the members of virtual teams.

In spite of these barriers, many companies have been adopting virtual teams. SAP is the world's largest inter-enterprise software company with more than 30,000 employees in sixty countries. It relies on virtual teams to survive. It has five headquarters around the globe, each one with a specific area of expertise shared via virtual meetings. IBM and General Electric are corporations that also depend on virtual team strategies.

Self-Managed Teams

A **self-managed** team is a group of employees that is responsible and accountable for all or most aspects of generating a product or delivering a service. It could be thought of as a mini-company within a larger organization. Traditional organizations assign tasks to employees depending on their skills or functional department (sales, finance, production). A self-managed team carries out the supporting tasks as well, such as planning and scheduling the technical workflow, and human-resource tasks such as managing vacations and absences. Team members may take turns leading and assuming technical responsibilities.

An example of a self-managed team is a remote group of engineers that double-checks and configures technical sales data that is uploaded daily. Rather than wait for a supervisor to assign tasks to the group, the group manages job assignments based on availability and skills. The group then works with project managers to implement solutions, again based on the team rather than a supervisor decision. The work finishes with the billing team. When difficulties or disagreements are encountered, the team works it out for themselves.

Because of the autonomy given to self-managed teams, these teams have greater ownership of the jobs they perform. Some benefits of self-managed teams are that team members share accountability for what they accomplish, which can be a great motivator; individuals have greater commitment to the task because they're directly responsible for its results; and team members take on some of their manager's work so he or she can work on other tasks.

However, self-managed teams are not without problems. **Groupthink** occurs more frequently with these teams. Members may struggle during the transition from supervisor-led management to self-management, possibly because of lack of interpersonal skills or poor implementation by the company. Not surprisingly, the most effective self-managing teams are found in companies where the corporate culture supports democratic decision making, and the employees are generally well-educated.

No matter how groups and teams come together, there are advantages and disadvantages that must be attended to, as in the unintentional assumption of roles by gender or age rather than by experience or expertise.

1. Global Workplace Analytics. "2018 Alternative Workplace Strategies Fifth Biennial Benchmarking Study." Global Workplace Analytics. Accessed March 08, 2019. <https://globalworkplaceanalytics.com/telecommuting-statistics>.

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