

Effective Teams – Case Studies

In this scenario, we examine two teams and their varying levels of performance. Consider the fundamental differences between the teams and how these differences have influenced their work outcomes.

Take note of your observations and answer the questions at the end.

Background: Tom, the General Manager of a local magazine, noticed the decreasing profits and distribution levels of magazines in general as a problem that affected the entire industry. However, his magazine was experiencing even greater losses than the average and he needed to take action.

He believed that focusing on customer satisfaction was essential for success, and he aimed to create a team to overcome organizational obstacles and promote improvement. This team is referred to as Team #1.

Team 1

Tom assembled a team consisting of his direct reports, who were all competent leaders. He believed that they would require minimal guidance to generate a successful solution, as long as they began collaborating more effectively.

It was evident to everyone in the group that the organization's current structure was hindering the development of a strong customer service culture. The departments of production, circulation, and advertising were operating independently, leading to power struggles and blame shifting. It was clear that a solution was needed to unite everyone and address these issues.

The plan involved utilizing Monday morning meetings as an opportunity for functional managers to familiarize themselves with the strengths and weaknesses of each other's departments. The purpose was to foster trust and collaboration among the managers, ultimately leading to a more effective resolution of the issue of poor customer service. This initial stage was seen as a crucial step in addressing the larger problem at hand.

At first, Tom's idea seemed effective. Instead of just talking, they focused on collaborative work at these meetings. For example, instead of each department creating their own budget and competing for funds, the managers worked together to agree on the magazine's entire budget. It seemed like the managers were aligning their efforts.

The managers adapted easily to the new way of working. They prioritized the team's needs over their own department's. The company started noticing changes in management's behavior. Employees thought the managers were doing great things on Monday mornings because everyone was happy and motivated. Tom was happy with his team's progress and believed they could handle the larger customer service issue.

However, after a year, Tom became frustrated. He had established a new Customer Service Department specifically designed to address the needs of advertisers. Many resources were dedicated to resolving the customer service problem and the management team consistently emphasized the importance of customer service. Despite these efforts, errors continued to occur and there was a lack of alignment between the sales representatives and advertisers.

The advertisers believed that the magazine did not meet their needs and was too focused on internal policies and procedures. One notable incident in the magazine's history was an ad that was deemed illegible and circulated among various departments before being pulled at the last minute. The general attitude was that since there was no designated person responsible for quality control, each individual processed the ad as they would any other.

It is evident that the management's efforts to change the customer service culture were unsuccessful. Although the managers were able to collaborate and comprehend each other, they remained unaware of the factors causing the subpar performance.

Team 2

Tom felt the need to take action. He began reading management books and articles, and one idea that kept coming up was a quality program aiming for zero defects. The process involved forming a quality team with front line staff. Despite his skepticism, Tom decided to give it a try out of desperation.

He formed a new team and set a performance goal for them - to eliminate errors. He selected the most skilled individuals from different areas of the magazine to join the team. He entrusted them with full responsibility for finding solutions and promised to implement their suggestions. He was too preoccupied with other tasks to lead the team himself and had low expectations for its success, so he appointed a mid-level supervisor from production to oversee the team.

Tom had doubts about the team's ability to produce good results. Initially, all they did was point fingers and assign blame, which reminded him of his own past behavior with his managers. The team appeared to be regressing instead of progressing, and the constant arguing was unbearable. No one was willing to look beyond their own problems.

A breakthrough occurred during the discussion of the illegible ad that went through the magazine's production process, leading to the realization that it was a problem for everyone involved, rather than just one person or department.

They examined the production process closely and found many errors. These errors included poor communication, tight deadlines, and negative attitudes. The team started to feel more confident as they accomplished real work together. They also resolved some important personal issues that had troubled them since the beginning.

With a proactive approach, they opted to address the broader organizational structure issues rather than focusing on specific methods of error detection before production. Ultimately, they restructured functional lines, redesigned processes, established new standards, and fostered a culture of quality that promoted excellent customer service.

The magazine saw a significant turnaround in customer surveys, which reflected the success of their hard work.

Questions

1. What was the main difference between Tom's team of managers and the team of staff?

2. Provide examples of the stages of development that each team went through.

3. What factors may have contributed to Tom's Management Team's inability to achieve its objective?

4. What actions do you believe would have led to achieving high performance?

5. What were the main contributing factors to the second team's success?
