

Silos, Territorial Conflict, Assets Not Maximized?

The Challenge of Moving from Clumps to Teams

by Bob Morris, President, OSA

OSA has built and developed teams nationwide from the executive to the frontline level for nearly twenty years. Since beginning with the American Automobile Association, we have worked in nearly every business sector and with all levels of government. We have learned several key lessons. Simply put, it's complex stuff and there's always something more to learn.

The first lesson is don't fool yourself, which a surprising number of businesses do. **Every** organization we have intervened with in the last six years claims to have teams. In reality, few do. Telling everyone they are now a team, changing the name of the Customer Service Department to *Customer Care Team*, and calling supervisors *team leaders* and managers *facilitators* does not make a team. Teams require a significant investment of time and money on the front end in order to become effective.

That's a primary reason why **clumps** are so prevalent. People are hired, given a job description and work area, and provided some orientation and maybe a little training, then told to have at it. They are assigned a phone to answer, a drill press to run, a list of clients/customers to contact. The organizational design and cultural norms reinforce **working territorially**. I don't get **rewarded** for answering your phone, helping on your drill press, or assisting with a close with your customer.

In fact, I might get sanctioned for not paying attention to my own calls, my own widgets, or my own clients. So at the end of the day while there is a lot of talk about better cooperation within and between units or shifts or sales territories, the results suggest otherwise. There's little synergy, collaboration or **real innovation**. Instead, my bucket of widgets or number of sales are added to yours to summatively arrive at the quarterly results. And in the process we hear about conflict between departments, silo mentality, and the enterprise not fully leveraging its assets.

Why is this the case? A principal reason based on our research is that organizations fail to budget for the **initial cost of teams** in terms of both time and money. Think about a philharmonic orchestra, a renowned acting company, or a successful high school soccer team. What do they have to do before they even **start to work**? They have to train and practice together. They have to come up with a score, a script, or a game plan. All of this requires the entire team to **meet in person** at the same time in the same location. There just aren't any virtual orchestras or soccer teams. So the front-end price for teams is not cheap, whereas for clumps it is. This makes it easy for an organization to kid itself into believing it has teams when all it really has is a shift in semantic labels.

A second lesson from our research and work with teams is that the **single biggest challenge for any team is dealing with conflict**. We assess seven independent dimensions of team functioning using our standardized instrument that has national norms. Over the last several years, the area that is consistently rated lowest across teams from all sectors is confronting difficulties with others. As Dean Tjosvold reports, “The substantial correlation (.67) between constructive controversy and successful decision making indicates that discussing opposing views skillfully contributes significantly to effective problem solving.” This is basically the same idea Larry Bossidy of GE, Allied Signal, and Honeywell is talking about when he argues that the basic unit of work is **dialogue**, and that it requires **active debate** and **candor**. Teams have a tricky time managing this without feelings getting hurt or opposing camps being formed. In other words, many team members would rather ignore or withdraw from conflict/debate. Issues don’t get surfaced, ill will grows, alliances build, and frustrations increase. Teams such as the one at Pike’s Fish Market in Seattle, where members **openly address** issues with each other, are much more productive. This requires **systematic training** and then diligent **performance management** if you want dialogue and candor to become established as working norms. There is no magic here.

Finally, we agree with Peter Drucker that **there are different types of teams**. This may seem like a trivial business observation, but think about the number of consultants and national training firms that preach about the one right way to team. The kind of teams you build and grow should be **contingent** on a number of factors.

Your business goals, the nature of your work, member composition, and your business environment, among others, are all factors to consider when establishing teams. At times, it also simply makes no sense to team. This is especially true if it’s a simple initiative or there is a tight timeline.

The bottom line is that teams require hard work and total commitment at the start. True teams can’t be achieved without up-front resources and sustained focus to making them happen. Like being partially pregnant, there is no such thing as half a team. Either you have them or you don’t. If you do, then we concur with Katzenbach & Smith who conclude on the basis of their McKinsey research that, “We believe **a few real teams** is one of the best ways of **upgrading the performance** ethic of an organization.”