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Enabling Structure

In the early 1970s, feminist political scientist Jo Freeman wrote a paper intended for her sisters in the women's liberation movement whose main message was neatly captured by its title: "The Tyranny of Structurelessness."¹ Freeman pointed out that feminist groups were not impeded by the excessive hierarchy and bureaucracy that often characterize enterprises created and managed mainly by men. But if women's groups had successfully avoided those dysfunctions, then why did they not have a better record of getting things done, of achieving the purposes to which their members were so deeply committed? The answer, Freeman suggested, was that having no structure can be every bit as debilitating as having too much. In her view, what was needed in feminist groups and organizations was not to more adamantly eschew hierarchy and bureaucracy but instead to invent, adapt, and learn to use well structures more consistent with feminist values.

Freeman's paper was controversial when it first was distributed, but it would not raise many eyebrows today. The experiences of contemporary team managers, whether in ideologically driven organizations such as worker

cooperatives or in traditional businesses and public agencies, affirm the wisdom and the generality of her message. These days, expert team managers focus much more on identifying structural features that can powerfully and efficiently facilitate teamwork than on tearing down existing structures in hopes that teams will thereby be “freed up” to accomplish their work unencumbered by organizational red tape.

It is true that traditionally designed organizations often are plagued by constraining structures that have been built up over the years to monitor and control the behavior of individual employees. Inappropriate or over-specified task structures, personnel policies, and control systems can indeed impede productivity when work is performed by teams. The question is what leaders should do in such circumstances. We saw in the previous chapter that it usually is futile to replace the exercise of legitimate managerial authority about team purposes with consensus decision making in hopes that a sharp and finely honed direction for a team eventually will emerge. It is just as futile to dismantle organizational structures in hopes of releasing a team’s pent-up power. Leaders who do that often wind up providing teams with *less* structure than members actually need to accomplish their work. Tasks are defined only in vague, general terms. Lots of people may be involved in the work, but they may be the wrong people or there may be too many of them. Norms of conduct are left entirely up to the group on the assumption, as one manager told me, that “The team will work out the details.” That is indeed what members will do—but, as Freeman noted, in the absence of an enabling team structure they may wind up wasting large portions of members’ time and energy on interpersonal and political issues of little relevance to the team’s main purposes.

Structure, like authority, is in itself neither good nor bad for teamwork. It all depends on the *kinds* of structures that are created. The best ones provide members with a solid platform on which to carry out their collective work but also leave lots of room for them to develop their own unique ways of operating. Rather than establish up front everything that may be needed for a team to perform well, wise leaders focus mainly on the handful of structural features that establish a good basic “frame” for the team’s work and then give the team plenty of room to mold that frame to their particular circumstances.²

In this view, structuring a team has much in common with designing a house or office. Does the architect attempt to anticipate all the uses to

which the space may be put and then, in hopes of optimizing utilization of the structure, generate a design that seeks to direct and constrain the behaviors that will occur within it? Or does the designer recognize that all the ways occupants may want or need to use the space can never be known ahead of time, and therefore create a structure that is well tuned to the basic functions the space will serve but also incomplete, unfinished, and adaptable? The latter approach recognizes that organic forms are always in a state of development and are never fully finished, and is the architectural parallel of good team structure.³

When designing work teams, then, leaders should refrain from specifying too much—but they also should take explicit initiatives to put in place the basic structures that will foster team effectiveness and minimize the organizational obstacles to teamwork. The key to good team design is to differentiate wisely between critical and unnecessary structural features. The three structural features that our research has shown to be key in setting the stage for effective teamwork are the design of the work that the team performs, the core norms of conduct that guide and constrain team behavior, and the composition of the team. These three features are explored, in turn, in the pages that follow.

THE DESIGN OF WORK FOR TEAMS

Good work design for teams is a fairly straightforward extension of what has been learned about the properties of motivating individual tasks. Some years ago, Greg Oldham and I proposed a set of task attributes that foster what is known as *internal work motivation* for individual performers.⁴ A person who is internally motivated feels good when he or she performs well, and feels terrible when the work has gone poorly, thereby lessening the need for motivational props such as performance-contingent extrinsic rewards or close supervisory scrutiny. People have internal motivation when they view their work as meaningful *and* feel personally responsible for work outcomes *and* receive trustworthy knowledge of the results of their efforts.

Even a task as inconsequential as writing a computer program to handle the routine management of one's personal finances can create the three psychological states and thereby elicit internal motivation. The task

is meaningful (at least to me: I'd love to rid myself of the tedium of bill paying, and besides, I find it challenging to write good computer programs). I have full responsibility for the work (I personally make all the decisions about program logic and coding). And knowledge of results is immediate and trustworthy (either the program runs correctly, or it does not). Take any of these three features away and internal motivation disappears. I cannot give myself a pat on the back if the work is trivial or entirely routine, or if I am not the one responsible for the work procedures (e.g., if I merely type in a program written by someone else), or if I submit the program but never see whether or not it runs properly.

What Oldham and I did was identify the measurable properties of jobs that give rise to the psychological states just described—experienced meaningfulness, felt responsibility, and knowledge of results—as is shown in figure 4-1. To illustrate, consider how the work of assembling a small appliance such as a kitchen toaster might be designed. On a traditional assembly line, a worker might do but a single and simple part of the overall task, such as attaching the power cord to the toaster chassis. A more motivating job, by contrast, would involve assembling the entire device, testing it, and perhaps even boxing it up for shipment to the customer. Making the toaster is *meaningful* to the worker for multiple reasons—she does the entire job from beginning to end, the work involves use of a variety of her skills, and it is inherently significant because the product will be valued by those who eventually use it. (“What did you do at work today, Mommy?” her child asks. There is a world of difference between saying “I attached lots of power cords” and saying “I made toasters for families to use in their kitchens.”) The worker feels personally *responsible* for the outcomes because she has considerable autonomy to make decisions about the work processes, rather than following to the letter a procedure that someone else engineered and that a supervisor enforces. And the worker has *knowledge of results* of the work, since she generates direct and trustworthy feedback by personally testing each toaster before it is shipped. Tasks that are designed in accord with these principles generally elicit far greater internal work motivation than do those that are simple, repetitive, and of little broader significance, that provide little or no latitude for decision making, and that rely more on supervisory assessments of how well the work has been done than on feedback built directly into the work itself.

FIGURE 4 - 1

Job Characteristics That Foster Internal Work Motivation



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Might the same principles be applied as well to work that is performed by teams? Is there such a thing as *collective* internal motivation? The affirmative answer to those questions is obvious to anyone who has observed the differences in behavior exhibited by members of the winning and losing athletic teams immediately after a championship game, or by members of a project team who have just learned that their proposal has been accepted (or declined) by the client for whom it was prepared, or by a medical team that has just saved (or lost) a patient. The collective celebration, or shared gloom, that one sees on such occasions attests to the fact that internal motivation is just as real for teams as it is for individuals.⁵

What specific features of a team's work foster collective internal motivation? The answer is illustrated in the way the Butler Manufacturing Company structured the work of teams that manufactured large grain driers for its farmer-customers some years ago at the plant it operated in Story City, Iowa.⁶ Teams were given full responsibility for constructing entire three-story-high grain driers from start to finish. It was a complicated operation, involving thousands of different parts and five types of work: assembly, fabrication, machining, painting, and shipping. Individual team members moved among these different types of work, both to provide variety and to expand each team's repertoire of skills and its flexibility. Teams had considerable latitude in how they proceeded with their work, participated in planning and scheduling meetings to ensure that the flow of completed products would meet customer requirements, and had full access to plant