

LEADERSHIP

Making teams work

BY STEVE KELMAN

When I started reading "Leading Teams: Setting the Stage for Great Performances" by J. Richard Hackman, a Harvard University psychology professor, I had no intention of writing about it. But about halfway through the book, I thought that this is the best book on teams I've ever read, with material that many Federal Computer Week readers would find helpful.

Teams are everywhere these days. When the Work in America Institute Inc. asked 100 leading companies what academic research would be most valuable to them, the overwhelming response was "creating and sustaining team-based organizations."

A key message in Hackman's book is: Organizations should not rush to assign work to teams just because everybody's doing it. Sometimes, an individual can better perform a job than a team can.

Managing teams inevitably involves a lot of coordination and decision-making, and if there aren't significant countervailing benefits to teamwork, the net result can be less productivity, poorer quality or both.

Success is often determined by how successfully the executives who establish a team and the team leader create a structure and environment for the team's activities, Hackman writes.

Teams have a greater chance of being successful if clear, motivating goals are articulated and the extent — and limits — of the team's authority are established. Teams are not good at determining goals themselves — they usually get bogged down in endless discussion. Setting goals is the job of those establishing the team.

To provide the right mix of empowerment and control, executives must make it clear where teams can use discretion and what behaviors are unacceptable.

Hackman cites the example of an airline that gave flight attendants wide latitude about how to treat customers. Airline officials, however, made it clear that

flight attendants were not allowed to break safety regulations or use free liquor to deal with a customer complaint.

Interspersed within the big themes are oodles of operational advice. Teams should be kept small (about six people should be the limit), because coordination costs increase dramatically the bigger a team gets. The best time for a team to discuss refining its methods and approaches is when it's about halfway through an effort.

One of the nice things about the operational advice

in the book — and much of the big-picture advice as well — is that it's backed up by actual academic research that Hackman generally keeps in footnotes, so this isn't just a pop guru talking.

Finally, the book gives many examples from public agencies and nonprofit organizations, not just businesses. In fact, one of Hackman's heroes, to whom he refers frequently, is former career manager Dave Mathiasen at the Office of Management and Budget — another reason to check out this book, which is available through the Harvard Business Review Press. ■

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