Relational Audit Case Study

Inter Departmental Synergy

A summary of an audit carried out in conjunction with KPMG

The client, an expanding multinational company, wanted to reduce the time to market for new products. They had developed a bespoke product development process and wanted help in the design and delivery of the roll-out programme for the new process. For any new product up to ten different departments in the company could be involved and inter-departmental communications and rivalry was seen as one of the features that typically slowed down both the product development process and the introduction of new working practices.

The project

To develop a roll-out process that would not only introduce the new processes to those staff who would be working with them, but also to incorporate as many points as possible that would help instil a culture of greater communication and consultation both on projects and on work in general.

The programme of work

The first step was to review with the board the background to the programme, their long term aims, the new product development process and the outline for the roll-out timetable and plans. This highlighted the key relationships and those that, if improved, offered the greatest scope for reducing the time to market.

Armed with this output the joint KPMG/ client team developed a roll-out process that included a cross-discipline training programme, cross discipline teams being formed for each new product and a communications programme for key managers who would need to support the programme.

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Relational aspects incorporated into the roll-out programme

As well as introducing the technical aspects of the new processes, the roll-out programme incorporated key elements of the relational framework - for example:

Directness: Initial project meetings were held "off-site" where all members of the team met face to face, introduced themselves and their background and the work of their department. The balance of these meetings (3+ days) was spent in a training workshop and in designing the project plan. Any steps not completed were flagged and a time and responsibility for completing them agreed. In addition discussion forums were set up on the company's network to allow team members to contribute ideas at any time irrespective of time zones. Through the new process the number of memos and e-mails has been cut back to be replaced by more face to face contact, discussion and phone/ video conference.

Continuity: By ensuring that each department nominated one person to be their representative on the project - and including the outcome of the project in their appraisals the former practice where at different times different members of any department may handle requests for help from a project was stopped. Allocating responsibility for participating in a project to one person also meant that other team members had nominated people who they knew to call in each department which again improved communication and speed of response. It also had the spin-off benefit that when people left or transferred that an orderly handover of project roles could be arranged - as the outgoing member of staff briefed the person taking over.

Multiplexity: Through the joint involvement in project design, and in particular the time taken up front to explain the work of each others departments team members not only knew each other better as people - but also understood the needs of each others departments and thus how these may impact on project timing and progress (e.g. the effect on the project if local needs were not understood and built into the plan). In addition the programme included sessions on giving and receiving feedback on people's working style within a team and the impact that that style had on others in the team.

Parity: The client set up a committee to oversee the implementation of the new process. Team leaders for all projects are nominated by this committee. Nevertheless, while the team leader carries responsibility for completing and submitting project plans and subsequently for ensuring the project meets its milestones - they are very much first amongst equals. Also all project teams set up team ground-rules to ensure that team members were treated fairly and benefits properly attributed. Finally, to ensure continued broadly based buy - in the project team decisions were just that, team decisions.

Commonality: Through investing time early in the project to agree the project aims and goals the team developed a shared view of the project. They also understood each others different background and experience and thus were better placed to value the different experience that the team members were able to bring to the project - both in terms of their perspective on the issues faced by the project and in terms of each others role in resolving the issues.

The outcome: actions and progress

Following the implementation of the new process, projects that had become becalmed have now made more progress in weeks than they had in months. New projects are up and running quickly and throughout the organisation there is a greater awareness of the skills and abilities of each department. As one member of the executive put it at one of the roll-out sessions:

"When we look back I think that we will see that the greatest benefit from the whole process came from getting the different departments to really talk to and understand each other."

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