

## SELF-DIRECTED MAINTENANCE TEAMS

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### SUMMARY

There is substantial evidence that self-directed workers in "bottom-up organizations" have high productivity and morale. Most examples of organizations making a successful switch to empowering front line workers have come about due to economic necessity. Companies facing financial crises have found they can survive and prosper when layers of management are removed and workers are turned loose to do their jobs. For this to occur, the employees *must* share the organization's values, avoid scapegoating (blaming one's failure on someone else), and above all, not become silent saboteurs. Oregon state government is currently facing an economic crisis due to the passage of the tax limiting Ballot Measure 5. Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) with its stable funding source is the only Oregon state agency that is experimenting with self-directed crews on a large scale.

The organizational structure developed during the area maintenance manager (AMM) pilot program is a marked departure from the structure that stood in place during our preceding seventy-five years (see Figure 1). The change is basic to the new philosophy that transfers certain responsibilities and authority to where the work is getting done. In this case, it is the crew as a team. The net impact on the new structure is a reduction in first line supervisors, from 21 supervisors to seven managers. Each of the seven AMMs oversees the operation of three crews. The crew/manager relationship is significantly different. Each crew is expected to prepare a work plan covering 30 days, 60 days, or even up to a year negotiated and agreed upon with the AMM. Each AMM has one area coordinator. This position is significant and allows for "state-of-the-art" automation equipment (PCS, FAX machines, copy machines, etc.) to be provided at the crew level in manageable numbers. Also, this position handles most of the routine paperwork, and performance tracking and reporting, thus removing much of the paperwork from the crew team level.

A team training model was developed by a consultant and based on developing creative thinking and consensus decision making. Team training was top-

down, beginning with the ODOT management team, followed by region management team, districts, areas and crews. Shortly after the region management team was trained, the self-direction concept was conceived. After a false start, it became apparent that an implementation plan would be required to clarify the many steps and milestones that would be necessary to convert to self-directed teams. In July 1990, the Director, Don Forbes, approved the two-year pilot program after reviewing the implementation plan. This was followed by a half-day meeting with all supervisors and managers to explain the concept and proposed change. The first formal training was a two-day awareness workshop for all employees.

A course titled, "Working Program" was started. This was a formal course consisting of four to five half-day sessions over four months to improve group communication skills. Formal team assessments were conducted for all crews to determine if they were ready to do the actual team-building. As crews were ready, team-building was scheduled. This class normally took two days. Throughout the two-year period, team-building was repeated for crews experiencing difficulties with the concept. Most of all the above training was accomplished in a six-month period.

Highway maintenance employees in ODOT are represented by the Oregon Public Employees Union (OPEU). OPEU is a statewide labor union that represents employees in approximately 50 different state agencies, and also counties, municipalities, and other local government agencies throughout the state. Labor relations between the state of Oregon and OPEU have been under some strain in recent years. The first ever statewide strike of state workers occurred in 1987. The strike was not focused exclusively on ODOT issues. In the fall of 1990, OPEU and ODOT's Region 4 signed a "Letter of Agreement" (LOA) which allowed for highway maintenance crews in central Oregon to work without "on site" supervision for a two-year period. This pilot program left the existing labor contract in place with very minor modifications. The LOA was ratified by a vote of the union members in Region 4. Although Region 4's relationship with OPEU on a local level has not been particularly troubled during the pilot program

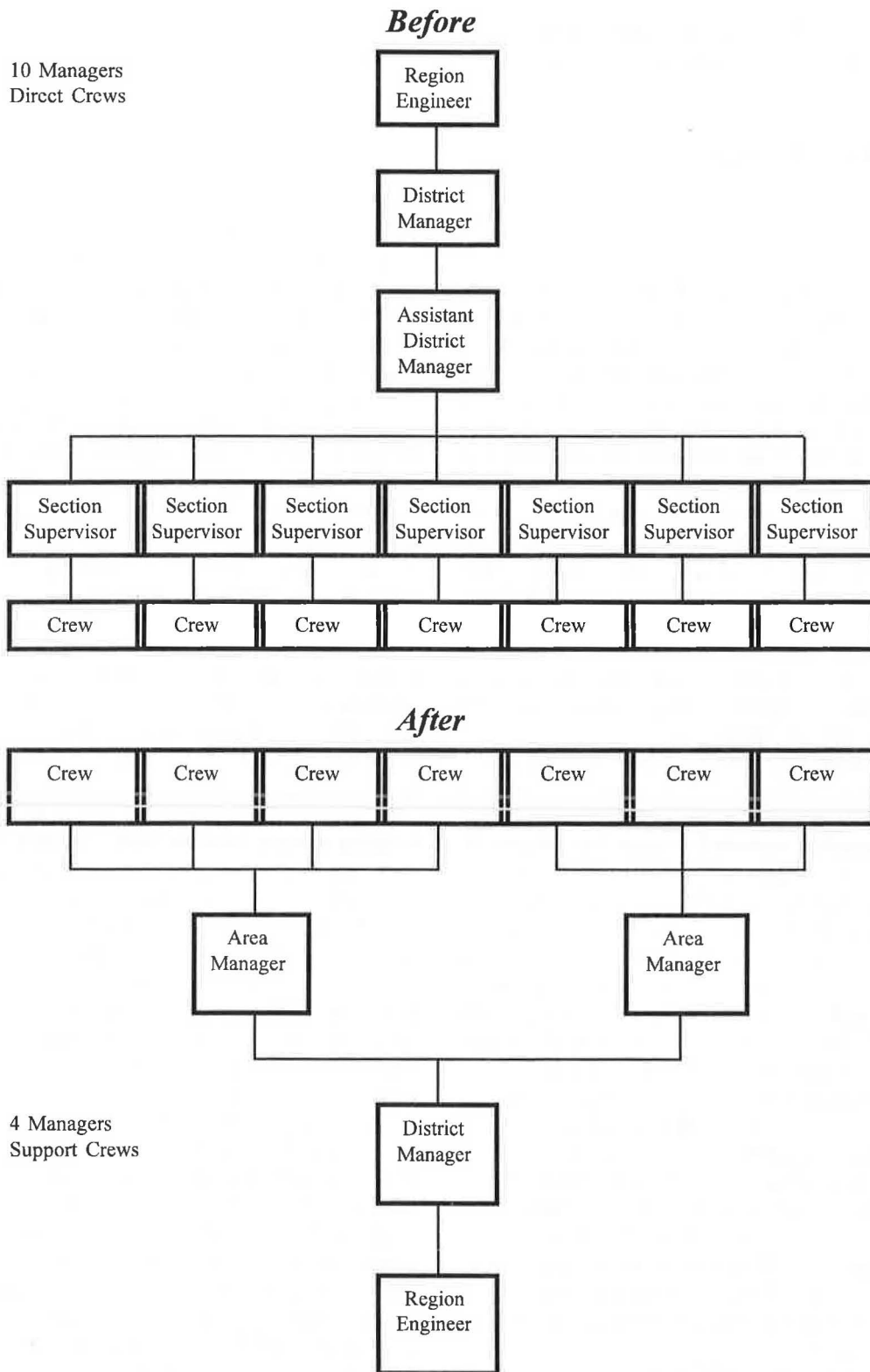


FIGURE 1 Change in organizational structure with self-directed maintenance teams.

it has not been the best possible environment in which to try to build a working relationship that is dependent on trust and cooperation.

In January 1992, sixteen months into the pilot program, the Region 4 labor/management committee asked all employees participating in the self-management pilot program to complete a survey asking for opinions on the experimental program and for suggestions on how to improve the program. Of the 200 employees working on self-managed crews, 150 individuals completed and returned the survey form. The narrative responses made coding difficult, but approximately 88% of the workers believed self-directed crews were a better way to run a highway maintenance organization than the traditional supervisor directed crews. In February 1992, ODOT and OPEU representatives agreed to extend the terms of the LOA for eight months to coincide with the normal expiration of the labor contract. It was agreed if ODOT wanted to continue the program beyond June 1993, the terms of a future agreement would have to be negotiated during the normal bargaining period that would begin in January 1993.

As an organization, OPEU has encouraged the governor, the legislature, and the management of state agencies to reduce the number of supervisors in the work force in response to the budget cuts brought on by the passage of the tax limiting Ballot Measure 5. While OPEU may not object to the basic structure of an organization that empowers its workers, the union has to be aware of the internal political implications. While workers like the autonomy the system gives them, a major problem with the program is it reduces the number of promotional opportunities for maintenance workers. To this point OPEU has been reacting to ODOT's initiatives on the pilot and has not been brought in as a decision-making partner. Labor/management committees in ODOT operate under the guidelines of Article 106 of the labor agreement and have no authority to make meaningful changes. The "meet and confer" format has not allowed ODOT and OPEU to adjust along the way.

This program is novel and innovative, and brings more value and public service to the users. It is a semi-finalist in the 1994 Innovations Awards Program sponsored by the Ford Foundation in collaboration with the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.