

SELF-DIRECTED HIGHWAY MAINTENANCE TEAMS: SUMMARY OF EXPERIENCES AND LESSONS LEARNED DURING THE FIRST FIVE YEARS 1990-1995

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BACKGROUND

The purpose of this innovative program was to significantly reduce layers of management, create empowered self-directed maintenance teams, improve product service with fewer financial resources and make better use of human resources.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

On October 1, 1990, 22 section crews scattered across Central Oregon from the Washington border on the North to the California border on the South, reported to their maintenance stations. For the first time in the 75-year history of ODOT, there was no boss. That morning, each crew was expected to think, plan and produce results. Under the new culture, it was expected that employees would feel empowered to make decisions, feel better about their work and advance innovations. The goals and objectives of this program were to:

- Improve customer satisfaction of highway maintenance;
- Measure productivity increases through a performance measurement matrix and benchmarking system;
- Implement a pay for performance concept in state government;
- Strive for a proactive, high-morale work force; and
- Eliminate an entitlement work culture, and if necessary openly compete with the private sector.

LITERATURE REVIEW—KEY ISSUES RELATED TO TEAMS

Teams operate in a very complex and still poorly understood environment. There are no real manuals

today for how to define and implement teams. There were even fewer resources when this program was started in 1990. The group was seen as the primary focus because individuals will resist changes that go against group standards or norms. Individuals will more readily accept changes when the group changes and the restraining forces are reduced. A person will naturally follow and accomplish goals that come from within while they may be highly resistant to goals set by others, unless they match their own internal goals.

We research the organization; start a change strategy; see how it is working; adapt to the new conditions; observe the results; and so on. Change is a dynamic process of trial and error that acknowledges the complexities of the change process and admits that we can not really predict the results of each change on a group of individuals or an organization of groups.

Commitment is a two way process - groups are more committed to individuals who help them attain group goals, and individuals are more committed to groups that help them satisfy personal needs. Interpersonal process has proved to be valuable for the personal growth of the participants, but of limited value in improving the ability of participants to be members of work groups. What makes group activities more successful is when the focus is on actual day to day work tasks. The group will focus on information gathering, problem solving and decision making functions. Avoid interpersonal issues except when there is clear evidence that such issues are hindering effective work performance.

Team building works when four conditions are met:

- Interdependence—the team is working on important problems in which each person has a stake. Team work is essential to success, not an ideology;
- Leadership—the boss wants to improve performance so strongly that he/she is willing to take the risk that initially the best decisions may not be made;
- Joint Decision—all members agree to participate; and
- Equal Influence—each person has a chance to influence the agenda.

Working with teams in the public sector is different than working with teams in the private sector in seven key ways:

- The dominant emotional tone in the public sector is fear;
- There are frequent crises of agreement in the public sector (groupthink);
- Loose coupling is prevalent in public sector systems;
- Politics and power are more persistent and insistent in the public sector;
- Confidentiality is more relaxed or less available in the public sector;
- Differentiation of high status and low status people is more pronounced in the public sector; and
- The press or media are much more a factor in change in the public sector. Public support for "risk taking" is normally lacking.

Companies with strong performance standards will usually have greater success with teams. By focusing on performance and team basics—as opposed to trying to become a team most small groups can deliver the performance results that require and produce team behavior.

LESSONS LEARNED DURING THE PROGRAM

Team Issues

Three key assumptions were made. 1) experienced maintenance crews and supervisors knew how to maintain highways and were the best decision-makers; 2) the area maintenance managers (AMMs) were capable of making technical decisions on required maintenance programs; and 3) AMMs and workers on crews were capable of dealing directly with the customers/public in their areas. All three assumptions turned out to be true.

Customer service and satisfaction was equal or better during the program. The self-directed highway maintenance teams each progressed in their own way and at their own pace. Personnel conflicts greatly slowed development. The maximum crew team size that appears to be able to effectively work together is 8 to 10 members without specially trained on-site facilitators. A few of the teams were very task oriented and had a long culture of high performance. These teams transitioned quickly and continued to perform well. An attitude of autonomy is necessary for effective self-direction. Intrinsic motivation appears to be a necessary ingredient for success. Task teams, that have specific and measurable performance goals, work better. The decision box for each team needs to be clearly defined and "handed off" as the team develops and is capable of making these decisions.

Process Issues

Disagreement among team members is natural and positive. Long-term, unresolved, personal conflict will stop a team from functioning effectively. The rapid implementation put teams immediately into a problem-solving mode and significantly challenged them to perform and actually solve real problems. The early in-house facilitators and the AMMs were the real strength of the immediate change. We would still launch the program as a single plan on a single date (rapid change), but we would do more planning and preparation work before the kick-off. The focus of the immediate change became the formation of teams. In hindsight, the focus should have been performance and using teams to accomplish that performance. The initial model and process was a beginning to get started and unfreeze the existing system - in that context it was very successful. We recommend that the change should not be a pilot but be implemented as a permanent, long-term change. Committed managers can change and adapt these new rules and models.

Management Issues

An ongoing in-house leadership academy that would nurture common understanding of leadership behavior at ODOT would have been extremely useful. A revised concept of shared leadership, each member of the crew doing what they are good at and each person leading those areas that are their unique talents, was successfully introduced later. This approach reinforced that while all crew team members are equal, they are not the same.

Self-directed teams cannot perform under autocratic managers or managers unable to accept some risk. Several managers could not "walk their talk" and had to be removed or removed themselves from the program. Many otherwise qualified people could not let go of control. They just did not fit well in this type of environment. Managers needed to serve a dual role. On the one hand, they were leaders encouraging their teams to use good team process, make good decisions and achieve high performance. On the other hand, they still needed to be managers of the workers defining and dealing with problems in behavior, performance and all the rules that are part of being in a state organization.

The lack of monetary incentives for becoming high performance self-directed teams is seen as one of the key issues that may block the program from reaching its full potential. It is highly recommended that other programs of this type build in team based incentive pay for successful teams. Clear, simple, highly visible performance

measures are highly recommended for organizations undertaking self-directed team programs. In retrospect, the self-managed approach went too far too fast and was not appropriate for a state agency in a union environment. Self-directed teams with significant management input is seen as the right balance. We recommend that other organizations clearly define the administrative/paperwork aspects of the program as part of the planning and provide sufficient administrative support to the program so that other resources will not be reduced. Initially, this may require increased staff to handle all the changes in process.

An informal team of the Region Manager and the seven AMMs actually was a key success factor of the program. We strongly recommend that the key managers

(in this case the AMMs) and a top manager totally committed to the program form a permanent team to implement and guide the program. This oversight support would need to remain for at least five years to make the program effective.

External Support

Visible public support by groups such as the Ford Foundation, Western Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, and the American Public Work Association was critical during the difficult transition.