Landcare Research
Manaaki Whenua

Supporting effective teamwork

A checklist for evaluating team performance

Margaret Kilvington and Will Allen

Summary

- Teams can be instruments for achieving changes in culture and practice in organisations.

- Teams need both technical know-how and other abilities such as the skills to communicate to different audiences, and good networks and relationships.

- Teams make better progress if they are aware of their goals, skills, capabilities and resources and are able to address any deficiency.

- Presented here is a checklist approach to evaluation, designed to help teams clarify and monitor their goals, assess their strengths and limitations, and respond to the needs of their own unique circumstances.

How best to manage and foster change is a much considered topic in today's organisations. While a group approach is not always necessary, many tasks facing organisations cannot be implemented by individuals working alone. Where problems and decisions involve a degree of complexity and uncertainty, where there is potential for misunderstanding and conflict, and where widespread acceptance and commitment are critical, such situations will call for group collaboration.[1]

This is particularly true of any initiative designed to change the way an organisation works, such as when introducing waste minimisation and resource use efficiency measures across a workplace. In situations of shifting culture and practice, teams of individuals are often regarded as critical vehicles not only for successful completion of specific projects but also dissemination of the vision behind the new practices (e.g. sustainability). Teams can be expected to champion work within an organisation, communicate upwards and across the organisation, and be able to initiate changes at many levels. To achieve this, teams often require new technical knowledge – but they also need other skills such as the ability to communicate to different audiences, and good networks and relationships.

Harnessing the potential power of a group can have a dramatic effect on an organisation's ability to simultaneously meet goals and improve job satisfaction. When a group is functioning well (whether it be a work team, sports team, friendship group, orchestra, religious group, or voluntary group), the group dynamics and sense of belonging and acceptance can bring out the best in people. Groups can enhance problem solving and creativity and generate understanding, acceptance, support, and commitment. In addition groups can increase morale, improve self-esteem, and help create consensus. Most people have had at least a few experiences where participation in an effective group or team has helped us to achieve at levels we never thought possible.

However, while teams may be a necessary part of successful organisational change, their presence certainly doesn't guarantee success. As most people can testify, groups can also be inefficient, confused, and frustrated.

SUPPORTING SUCCESSFUL TEAMS

One way to influence how effective a team will be is to ensure certain factors are built into their set-up, such as ensuring the team membership comes from all parts of the organisation that have an influence on the project. However, beyond ensuring the team has a good basis for achieving its project goals, what is needed is a way to assess 'actuality against intention'. That is, are the teams operating the way they were intended, and, if not, what can be done to improve the actuality? For instance, if a management representative has been included in the team to provide links to key decision-makers, is this working? Is the team maintaining enthusiasm for their tasks? Is the team membership sufficient to manage the workload?

To do this requires a shift of focus from 'getting the right team structure' to maximising the effectiveness of the team at doing its job. What can be useful is for teams to have some way of self-monitoring their performance, not just in terms of the outcomes they are achieving but also in terms of the key ingredients that are enabling them to make progress. This requires some knowledge of groups as dynamic entities – going through phases of development with different needs at different times; and some way of enabling the team to assess how well they are going and what their changing needs might be.

EVALUATING TEAM PERFORMANCE

The following checklist has been developed to guide teams in thinking about the key elements that make teams work. This evaluation is not designed to score or rate a team's value; rather, it is to help a team critically reflect on what has been successful for them and what they would like to do differently in the future.

Rather than study a list of 'how-to's' that might seem self-evident, this approach uses a checklist of aspects critical to successful teams that participants discuss in terms of their own situation. The process begins with the range of goals that a specific team wishes to accomplish. Through a facilitated, self-reflection exercise teams decide whether an aspect of team functioning is important in their context. If they agree

it is, they then discuss how well this is going and whether any changes are needed. The strength of this process is that generic issues of team activity are covered in a way that is unique and specifically relevant to any individual team.

The checklist has been developed through a literature review of factors important to the effective management and growth of teams.[2] These factors help a team reflect on their performance in five main areas:

1. Goals
2. Results and productivity
3. Team structure
4. Team operation
5. Team skills

PROCESS

1. Begin with the team goals

Because teams are purposeful, i.e. they are there because people have come together to achieve certain tasks, each evaluation begins by asking teams to define their goals. This

review of goals includes both formal goals (the ones the team has most likely been set up to achieve) and informal goals (those that the individuals bring to the team or that the team itself has developed for its members).

2–5. Team productivity, structure, operation and skills
are addressed through a series of questions detailed in the checklist (see table). These questions are opened up for facilitated discussion by the team. As a way of getting closure on each question, the team is asked to come to a consensus on their performance in this area using colour dots according to a 'traffic light' system:

Green   *This aspect is well covered*   🟢

Yellow   *We need to think about this as it maybe a limiting factor*   🟡

Red   *This factor needs to be addressed as it is limiting team performance*   🔴

A record is kept of the comments associated with each area of team activities and at the close of the evaluation the team agrees a time and place to discuss their response to their 'red dot' and 'yellow dot" factors. Responses may arise immediately during the evaluation and team members may agree to take action.

Points to note when undertaking the evaluation
- While the checklist is designed to be used by an external evaluator, a team that has facilitation skills within its own

membership can undertake its own evaluation.

- Where teams feel they were doing well, it is useful to prompt them to think about the reasons why this was so. Where teams identify that they have a weakness, they could be offered a short opportunity to work through the barriers and develop steps that could be taken to improve their performance.
- The fifth section of the checklist asks about essential skills that are required for team operation. However, because these skills underpin team performance in the above areas, they are often covered in preceding sections.

OUR EXPERIENCE WITH THE CHECKLIST APPROACH

We have used the checklist-based evaluation approach to help develop the capacity of teams involved in changing company practices around waste minimisation.[3] These teams were already receiving technical training in how to assess and address wasteful resource use in their companies. What was needed was some support that enabled them to be effective in delivering on their projects and influencing events across the company. What we found was that:

- Using the checklist in a reflection-based evaluation helped teams identify a number of factors that were holding them back. For some these were matters of leadership, or key contacts they were lacking, or limitations in their project planning.
- Facilitation was critical to the usefulness of the checklist approach. An evaluation can seem 'negative' – i.e. pointing out failures. Teams need to feel confident that this evaluation is 'by them and for them', but also teams can need to be pushed to think beyond the immediate response that 'everything is alright'.
- The more open a team's work environment was to learning and development, the more ready the team was to look for ways to improve what they are doing. Further, the more experience teams get with the core factors of effective teams, the more natural and frequent the monitoring of progress becomes.

box 1: SUMMARY TABLE: TEAM PERFORMANCE

No.	Task		Rate
1. Results and productivity			
1.1	Does the team have clearly identified actionable steps to achieve its goals?		
1.2	Does the team monitor its progress against concrete milestones?		
1.3	Does the team regularly and frequently assess how well they are working together?		
1.4	Are the team's successes, big and small, acknowledged?		
1.5	Does the team learn from its failures?		
2. Team structure			
2.1	Is the team the right size, with the right mix of players for your purpose?		
2.2	Does the team have the flexibility to bring in people and change membership to suit the current project?		
2.3	Does the team have the right resources?	• Money • Time • Resources	
2.4	Does the team meet regularly?		
3. Team operation			
3.1	Does the team have effective leadership?		
3.2	Do the team members understand their roles and are they able to carry them out effectively?		
3.3	Does the team have good networks?	• Internally • Externally • With management	
3.4	Does the team have useful meetings with clear identification of tasks?		
3.5	Does the team have effective ways of managing conflict?		
3.6	Is the team functioning in a way that people freely express ideas and share opinions?		
3.7	Does the team stay motivated?		
4. Team skills: Does your team have these?			
	- Managing meetings: setting agendas, managing time etc. - Documenting progress: keeping minutes, records etc. - Data and information gathering - Facilitation: dealing with conflict, managing constructive debates etc. - Innovation: introducing creative ideas - Presentation: summarising finds to relevant audiences - Networking: bring comment, feedback etc. to the team - Motivation: reminding team of success - Task performing: reliably doing relevant tasks		

REFERENCES

1 Wertheim EG 2000. Surviving the group project: A note on working in teams.   http://www.cba.neu.edu/~ewertheim/teams/ovrvw2.htm
2 Allen W, Kilvington M 2001. Building effective teams for resource use efficiency. Landcare Research Contract Report LC0001/60. http://www.landcareresearch.co.nz/research/social/teams_evaluation.asp
3 Kilvington M, Allen W 2001. Appendix II: A checklist for evaluating team performance. In: A participatory evaluation process to strengthen the effectiveness of industry teams in achieving resource use efficiency: The Target Zero Programme of Christchurch City Council. Landcare Research Contract Report LC0001/62.   http://www.landcareresearch.co.nz/research/social/teams_evaluation.asp