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## Self-Directed Work Teams: The Antidote for "Heroic Suicide"

Nancy K. Franz

University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension, [nancy.franz@unh.edu](mailto:nancy.franz@unh.edu)



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## Self-Directed Work Teams: The Antidote for "Heroic Suicide"

### Abstract

Environmental pressures, including deeper accountability and uncertain public funding, enhance interest in the use of self-directed work teams. These pressures and rapid change make solo work in organizations "heroic suicide." This article examines the rationale for self-directed work teams, characteristics of effective work teams, and successful work team leadership.

### Nancy K. Franz

Associate Director

University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension

[nancy.franz@unh.edu](mailto:nancy.franz@unh.edu)

Environmental pressures, including deeper accountability and uncertain public funding enhance interest in the use of self-directed work teams. These pressures and rapid change make solo work in organizations "heroic suicide." This article examines the rationale for self-directed work teams, characteristics of effective work teams, and successful work team leadership.

### Why Self-Directed Work Teams?

Success in today's workplace often derives from teamwork and employee empowerment (Axelrod, 2000; Boyett & Boyett, 1998; Purser & Cabana, 1998). This democratization of work stems from globalization, increased diversity, the development of technology, and unprecedented environmental change (Heckscher & Donnellon, 1994; Hickman, 1998; Renn, 1998). Many organizations, including Cooperative Extension, turn to collaborative work to embrace and capitalize on this change (Boone, 1990; Hutchins, 1992; Patterson, 1998).

Increased organizational effectiveness and personal satisfaction result from self-directed work teams (Forsyth, 1999). Organizationally, teams:

- Produce higher quality solutions,
- Increase customer satisfaction,
- Reduce operating costs,
- Improve quality and productivity,
- Better align workloads,
- Retain and attract top employees,
- Rapidly response to technological change,
- Increase innovation and creativity,
- Support risk taking,
- Create organizational growth through learning,
- Serve as mechanisms for honoring the past, and
- Appreciate and use diversity (Huczcz, 1996; Mackay, 1993; Wellins, Byham, & Wilson, 1991).

For individuals, teams provide:

- Motivation
- Personal growth
- Job satisfaction
- Sense of community
- Fulfilling relationships
- Constructive conflict resolution
- Leadership development
- Empowerment and trust

- Attention to worker values (Brilhart, 1983; Huszczo, 1996; Mackay, 1993; Wellins, Byham, & Dixon, 1994).

One Extension researcher states, "Ultimately, teams make better decisions, are more innovative and productive, and exhibit an increased willingness to take risks" (Nall, 1998).

Self-directed work teams, defined as a group of employees responsible for a "whole" work process, bring a product or service to internal or external users (Wellins, Byham, & Wilson, 1991). Two or more people work together on a specific goal through interrelated activity (Larson & LaFasto, 1989). Team approaches most often succeed when:

- Work crosses disciplines and functions,
- Products and services need quick development,
- The environment changes rapidly,
- Innovation and learning are priorities,
- Task completion requires individual contribution to the whole, and
- The work requires little supervision (Forsyth, 1999)

Given these benefits, work teams without a doubt need to become the norm rather than the exception for Extension work.

## Effective Work Teams

According to Hackman (1990), successful work teams fit three criteria. First, task output must be acceptable to team members and stakeholders. Second, success is defined as maintaining or strengthening the capability of team members for future work together. Finally, successful teams meet the needs of team members rather than creating frustration (Forsyth, 1999).

A review of research on work team effectiveness reveals 10 characteristics of successful teams (Axelrod, 2000; Bradford, 1978; Brilhart, 1983; Ciulla, 1998; Cranton, 1998; Fairholm, 1991; Fisher, 1995; Hackman, 1990; Huber, 1997; Huszczo, 1996; Jewell & Reitz, 1981; Larson & LaFasto, 1989; Purser & Cabana, 1998; Wellins et al., 1994; Wellins et al., 1991).

- *Clear purpose*--Team members understand the group goal and how it fits the overall work. They have clear direction and understand the nature and complexity of their effort. Team members accept the group's purpose and find it meaningful.
- *Team member attributes*--Talents, attitudes, beliefs, values, and personalities each member brings to the team greatly affect success. Group dynamics fueled by individual differences, status, power, pressure towards uniformity, and willingness to collaborate affect the team's work. Success often depends on individual readiness to work with others.
- *Unified commitment*--Teams with strong commitment to the goal and each other share values and beliefs about their purpose and personal interactions. A high level of cohesiveness and participation exists.
- *Strong relationships*--Successful teams build and enhance constructive internal and external relationships in meeting their goals. This requires collaboration across boundaries and interdependence for completing tasks.
- *Communication*--Open communication, including deep listening, supports civilized disagreement and constructive conflict resolution. Successful teams agree on procedures for decision making and mutually negotiate work boundaries. Effective teams openly share information.
- *Trust and confidence*--A high level of trust results in enhanced personal and group confidence. These groups operate informally and provide psychological safety for their members. Groups with strong trust and confidence support risk taking.
- *Accountability*--Results, accountability, and high standards of excellence drive successful teams. Members share responsibility for outcomes, and everyone contributes.
- *Leadership*--Successful work teams thrive when leaders create environments that nurture creativity, accomplishments, and relationships. These leaders are supportive, principled, and serve as coaches and facilitators. They lead group processes that balance task with relationship building and enhance the group's capacity for change.
- *Clear, enticing roles and responsibilities*--Members of successful teams understand what needs accomplishing, and they enjoy working together. They realize individual efforts contribute to the larger organization in a meaningful way.
- *Physical factors*--Successful teams depend on size, material resources, and physical operating environments. The influence of these factors often relates to the nature of the task at hand.

In addition to these internal characteristics of effective work teams, external characteristics such as organizational context, reward systems, competition, and team autonomy within the organizational structure also affect the success of work teams.

# Leading Work Teams

As organizations, including Extension, move from a paradigm valuing individual work to focusing on team efforts, the leader no longer simply manages tasks. The role instead requires facilitating processes to create fertile team environments. This demands a different orientation to leadership and different skills and actions. Leadership, rather than residing in one person, is now "accomplished as a team function, with and through teams (Kinlaw, 1991, p. 51)."

Leadership goals in a team context include increased group development and performance (Kinlaw, 1991) and building trust, autonomy, and authority of team members (Cottrill, 1997). This requires leaders to serve as co-learners, resources, models, problem solvers, trouble shooters, and advocates for collaborative learning (Cranton, 1998). Specific leadership qualities in successful teams include being rational and interpersonal problem solvers, showing respect for others, believing in mutuality to accomplish goals, and demonstrating effective facilitation (Kinlaw, 1991).

Leaders facilitating teams primarily:

- Manage communication process,
- Neutrally direct discussion,
- Monitor effective use of group time,
- Stimulate creative and critical thinking, and
- Promote teamwork and cooperation (Brilhart, 1983; Ludwig, 1998).

Enhancing these leadership roles includes:

- Knowing personal strengths and weaknesses,
- Leading situationally,
- Knowing when not to lead situationally,
- Working with diverse skills and styles,
- Planning 80% of the team's value for the first 50% of the effort,
- Sharing power with others,
- Realizing that suspicion and rumors can lead to reality,
- Motivating others through shared beliefs and values,
- Actively managing conflict, and
- Building trust through relationships

Team leadership appears more complex than heroic leadership. However, no one person can effectively handle the difficult problems facing organizations today.

## Conclusion

Research shows that organizations like Extension succeed when teams carry out complex work. Extension needs to build successful teams and develop effective team leaders to better address the problems and issues facing people and communities today. Heroes must join together to enhance Extension's effectiveness and sustainability through self-directed work teams.

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