

SELF-DIRECTED WORK TEAMS GET RESULTS

The way we organise and manage work has been changing dramatically over the last few decades.

In the late '70s and early '80s, the concept of participative management became increasingly popular in Australia. Programs with buzzwords such as Employee Involvement, Workplace Democracy, Total Quality and Quality Circles were popular. Although sometimes successful, these programs did not fulfil all the promises expected of them. Managers and supervisors still made the decisions.

In recent years, another style of work organisation has emerged, giving greater responsibility to employees with the emphasis on teamwork. This new approach has become known as 'Self-Directed' or 'Self-Managed Work Teams'. More and more organisations are finding it profitable to follow this path.

Organisations that have implemented Self-Directed Work Teams have made substantial gains:

- Improvements in productivity of up to 30%
- Reduction of lead times by up to 75%
- Improvements in quality - reduction in errors and defects by up to 90%.

How a Self-Directed Work Team Operates

A Self-Directed Work Team has, typically, 6-18 members working together in a functional area, responsible for a particular service or unit of production. Team members are trained in all job skills for their area and have the authority to plan, implement and control all work processes.

The team is jointly responsible for output, productivity, quality, service and costs, and monitors its own performance against agreed objectives.

Team activities are coordinated by a facilitator or team leader, who is a working member of the team. In mature teams, the leadership is rotated between members. The leader is responsible for helping the team to agree its goals, solve problems and make decisions.

Every Good Team Needs a Coach

An external facilitator or coach helps the team set its goals, provides assistance and support where required and develops team skills. The coach is normally a middle manager who moves from the role of directing/controlling to guiding/facilitating. The role of coach is one of the most difficult to perform successfully, as it involves changing our traditional concept of a manager.

Introducing Self-Directed Work Teams

There are four distinct phases in the successful implementation of Self-Directed Work Teams.

1. Preparation. The overall strategy is developed and explained to all staff.
2. Training and Initial Implementation. The groups who will be moving to self-direction are identified and a pilot team selected. Starting with the pilot group, teams are trained in interpersonal skills and teamwork and informed about Self-Directed Teams. Depending on the size of the organisation, this phase can last from several months up to a year as teams are progressively introduced to the concepts, team leaders are selected and coaches appointed.
3. Implementation and Consolidation. This phase may take one or two years for each team as it becomes progressively more responsible in self-management.
4. Performance. Once the teams fully accept their responsibilities and learn to work effectively together, significant and sustainable performance is achieved.

It's Worth the Effort

The journey is often difficult and overnight success is rare. The implementation of Self-Directed Work Teams calls for a major shift in the way we manage and organise our people. But, for those organisations prepared to make the commitment, the rewards in terms of improved performance as well as personal job satisfaction are well worth the effort.