Developing Teams

Volunteer administrators often work with groups of volunteers. These groups may be volunteer advisory boards, programming committees, or volunteer middle management teams. Transforming such groups into effective teams is essential for success.

Group dynamics can be described as the 'natural forces' that are often overlooked but strongly influence how a team conducts themselves, responds to situations, or performs. Recognizing and utilizing group dynamics is a key factor in the success or failure of any leader. The characteristics of the individual team members, as well as the characteristics of the group as a whole, have a dramatic effect on the dynamics of the group.

Stages of Group/Team Development

There are five stages in the development of a group that greatly affect group dynamics. The stages are forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning (Tuckman and Jensen Model of Group Development). The leader who helps their team through each stage of group development will end up with a highly functioning and effective team.

Forming

Forming begins as the new group comes together. This is a time when the group members are getting to know each other. It is at this time that the leader informs the group of its purpose. The leader uses a directing leadership style. This stage is characterized by:

- High dependence on leader for guidance and direction. Little agreement on team aims other than received from leader.
- Individual roles and responsibilities are unclear.
- Leader must be prepared to answer a lot of questions about the team's purpose, objectives and external relationships.
- Processes are often ignored.
- Members test tolerance of system and leader.
- Individual behavior is driven by a desire to be accepted by the others, and avoid controversy or conflict.
- Serious issues and feelings are avoided, and people focus on being busy with routines, such as team organization, who does what, when to meet, etc.
- But individuals are also gathering information and impressions - about each other, and about the scope of the task and how to approach it.
• This is a comfortable stage to be in, but the avoidance of conflict and threat means that not much actually gets done.

The leader should provide opportunities for the group to interact and get to know each other outside of the work environment during this stage. The leader's actions are purposeful with the goal of getting the group off the ground.

Storming

As the group gets to know each other, they enter the Storming stage of group development. During this time, team members vie for position as they attempt to establish themselves in relation to other team members and the leader, who might receive challenges from team members. The leader should use a coaching style during this stage where both directing and motivating behaviors are used. Characteristics of the storming stage are:

• Clarity of purpose increases but plenty of uncertainties persist.
• Cliques and factions form and there may be power struggles.
• Decisions don't come easily within group.
• The team needs to be focused on its goals to avoid becoming distracted by relationships and emotional issues. Compromises may be required to enable progress.

As painful as it can be, this stage should not be skipped. Nor should the leader allow the group to stay mired in the storming stage. Teambuilding strategies such as mock problem-solving games, rehearsals of actual programs, and facilitated low-ropes course activities, can help groups push through this phase.

Norming

As the third stage evolves, the "rules of engagement" for the group become established. The group's tasks or responsibilities become clearer and consensus is reached about how the group will proceed. Having had their arguments, they now understand each other better, and can appreciate each other's skills and experience. Characteristics of this stage include:

• Individuals listen to each other, appreciate and support each other, and are prepared to change pre-conceived views.
• They feel they're part of a cohesive, effective group.
• However, individuals have had to work hard to attain this stage, and may resist any pressure to change - especially from the outside - for fear that the group will break up, or revert to the storming stage.

During this stage, the leader provides less direction, but facilitates and enables the group. The group begins performing more like a team during this stage and progress on the task can now been seen.

Performing

Performing is the highest level that a group attains and not all groups reach this stage. The group is now a high performing team, characterized by a state of interdependence and flexibility. During this stage, the leader delegates and oversees. The group is self-managing, requiring little direction or motivation from the leader. Characteristics are:

• Everyone knows each other well enough to be able to work together, and trusts each other enough to allow independent activity.
• Roles and responsibilities change according to need in an almost seamless way.
• Group identity, loyalty, and morale are all high, and everyone is equally task-orientated and people-orientated. This high degree of comfort means that all the energy of the group can be directed towards the task(s) in hand.

Adjourning

Tuckman's fifth stage, Adjourning, is the break-up of the group. The group has successfully completed the task. From an organizational perspective, recognition of and sensitivity to people's vulnerabilities in this stage is helpful, particularly if members of the group have closely bonded and feel a sense of insecurity or threat from this change. The leader resorts to a more coaching leadership style. In addition to celebrating their success, the leader should help the group evaluate its process. How can the group improve HOW it accomplished its task?

Summary

Organizations that use the shared leadership model where volunteers are empowered to make the greatest contributions, have unlimited potential in serving their clientele. The volunteer administrator will reap many rewards through the effective use of teambuilding strategies and the development of individual volunteers.
References