

# Are You Creating Horizontal or Vertical Teams?

by Mark Samuel

## **"A team is a team is a team."**

I don't actually remember anyone saying this, but I see many people implement teams as if this statement were true. Of course, nothing is further from the truth. Whereas many organizations emphasize skill building to develop teams, a system that addresses team functioning can make the difference between success and failure.

## **A Brief History**

In the beginning, prior to the use of teams as an organizational norm, most employees were autonomous and performed their function independently from the rest of the organization. This way of functioning resulted in wasted resources, duplication of effort, and poor coordination. Teams were thus formed to resolve the common breakdowns of working autonomously. Except for project and task force teams, most were formed as Vertical Teams.

## **Vertical Teams**

A Vertical Team is one where the leader of the team (usually the manager) is responsible for setting the direction, priorities and the goals for the team (see figure #1). The team may create a Vision and set of Success Factors based on the primary goals for the team, but once the team has to operationalize those goals, it is up to the leader to establish priorities and to resolve conflicting agendas between the team players and their functions. The team, in turn, is responsible for sharing information, coordinating their activities, and supporting the other team members and their functions. This is what sets them apart from an autonomous group that doesn't share information or actively support one another. In a Vertical Team, if a team member is not doing their part to accomplish their goals, it is up to the team leader to intervene and resolve the performance problem. When changes occur and the leader has to change one's priorities they inform the involved team member. The team leader is placed in a position of ultimate controller for the team.

Due to constantly changing demands and limited resources, members of a Vertical Team experience confusion about their roles and priorities. They communicate and coordinate their activities on a regular basis, but they seem to run into one another or feel excluded in decisions or changes that affect them. This results in crisis, duplication of effort, and false starts on changes that individual team members are trying to make. No longer is a high level of communication and coordination enough to prevent the conflicts and breakdowns that cripple high performance. Members of Vertical Teams feel they are

working harder to get ahead, only to find themselves consistently overwhelmed by endless activity.

Ultimately, Vertical Teams break down due to never-ending changes and the overwhelming demands they make on both the team leader and team members. Usually, the manager is blamed for not coordinating all of the changing priorities affecting the team. Generally, it is expected by the team leader that team members will coordinate changes with each other. However, team members tend to view this as too complex and time-consuming. Because the leader alone coordinates the priorities and changes that affect each member, only the leader will know who is affected and how; therefore, it is impossible for members of a Vertical Team to keep each other adequately informed. Unfortunately, the task of informing all of the team members affected by the change is too time-consuming and cumbersome, so leaders typically fall short. Vertical Teams are not effective in organizations that are dealing with numerous or fast-paced changes.

### **Horizontal Teams**

On a Horizontal Team, the team leader is still responsible for setting the direction of the team; however, the entire team is involved in translating the direction into an agreed-upon set of priorities (see figure #2). The team identifies the most important priorities that it is accountable for, based on the direction of the organization, the specific needs of their primary customers, and the specific goals directed by upper levels of management. The team, as a group, is also involved in strategizing a process for accomplishing those priorities, and in evaluating the specific roles, relationships and functions needed to achieve their goals. This ensures alignment between the different functions represented on the team and an agreement on the priorities which override individual (functional) priorities.

Based on these individual priorities, each team member identifies the degree of impact on, or involvement for, their teammates and their functions. This enables team members to plan their involvement with each other, and to provide each other with an understanding of their roles and responsibilities, in order to support each other's priorities. Then, when it is time to coordinate their activities, each person has a complete picture of the various changes that are going to take place, who is the specific lead for managing those changes and which team member is specifically involved in the changes. This process provides the context necessary for adapting to change and quickly clarifies changing expectations without dependence on the manager. Thus, each member of a Horizontal Team has greater accountability for setting their priorities, supporting other team members and responding appropriately to change.

The team leader's role is to ensure that the team is making progress on each of the priorities that have been identified. They assist the team in monitoring progress and ensuring that each functional area is maintaining their accountability to one another and to the team as a whole. Also, the leader must be the primary link to upper management for responding to new requests, preventing problems, and for coordinating within the

team the changes that come from upper management. Finally, the manager is responsible for representing the needs and accomplishments of the team to upper management.

The concern of Horizontal Teams is that the team members don't have time to plan or be involved in each other's priorities. However, this is a misinterpretation of the process. Each person is still responsible for planning the strategy to complete their own priorities; the difference is that they create their own processes for change and share it with the other team members for general buy-in and support. This ensures that each team member knows when they will be needed and that a functional area won't be left out, which could later lead to breakdown.

The transition to Horizontal Teams enables team leaders to focus more on global and strategic issues affecting the team, enabling them to anticipate and avoid crisis and to prepare their team to respond to change. Ultimately, Horizontal Teams demonstrate excellence in customer service and improvement in team relationships.