Implementing teamworking in a higher education setting: a case study

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Describes how, in response to the major changes in the operating environment for a higher education institution, an approach to teamworking was piloted and facilitated by one of the authors. Describes the approach taken and highlights some of the issues raised in the programme, with explanations. Discusses lessons learned from the initiative.

Introduction

Our paper is derived from an MBA dissertation project which focused on the implementation of teamworking within the School of Textile Studies at Bolton Institute. The idea stemmed from the authors’ experiences in the higher education environment which has changed rapidly since the late 1980s, bringing with it considerations which previously were believed by many to affect only commercial organizations. These include:

- departments as “cost” and “profit” centres;
- viewing students, sponsors, parents, industry, and other groups as customers;
- demand for courses varying with economic and social conditions;
- resources allocated in relation to demand as opposed to departmental “requirements”.

These notions reflect an increasingly competitive environment, wherein a number of features can be identified:

- there are more competitors than ever, owing in part to deregulation;
- competitors adopt diverse means to attract custom;
- customers’ expectations are increasing;
- investors’ expectations are increasing.

Thus the environment has changed from being “simple and stable” to “complex and turbulent”[1].

In response, a number of initiatives have now been adopted by higher education establishments, aimed at increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of the organization. These include total quality management (TQM), the British Standards Institute’s (BSI) BS 5750, and the Training and Education Council’s (TEC) “Investors in People” initiative (IIP).

Broadly speaking they endeavour to bring a focus to bear on the organization’s customers by all of the workforce in order to provide total satisfaction or to “delight”[2]. In so doing the organization is able to strengthen its bonds with customers, and thus exert some measure of control over its “first level environment”[3]. Focusing the workforce in this way, to provide customer delight, requires some fundamental changes in emphasis on the part of management away from the traditional style, which is characterized by:

- short-term profitability (businesses) or short-term accounting (public services);
- having no clear strategic position;
- clamping down on costs while tolerating high levels of wastage;
- a “take it or leave it” attitude to customers;
- buying at the lowest price;
- making arbitrary changes when forced into it;
- firefighting management – the “trouble-shooter” approach.

In effect, having realized that control can be exerted on external factors only as a result of radical internal changes, management has undertaken to change its priorities, especially on the use of resources within the organization, particularly the workforce[4]:

...the competitive situation and competitive breakthroughs required, apply equally to managers in business and service organizations. It is just as important that they are taken up in education and the National Health Service, as that they are practised in manufacturing industry or the financial services.

The TEC’s IIP initiative forms a part of the management approach to TQM. It is seen to be particularly appropriate within the service sector where measurements of quality cannot be quantified as readily as in manufacturing, where outputs can be measured, weighed and compared against specifications. Investors in People is a structured method for ensuring that employee development is linked closely to competitive forces, and this requires a team culture within an organization. It is based on the experiences of many successful UK companies which have found that performance is improved by a planned approach to setting and communicating business goals to the workforce and by developing people to meet these goals so that “what people can do and are motivated to do matches what the business needs them to do”[5]. It does not, however, constitute a rigid model for doing this. It is expected, by its proponents, that changes will have to be made within differing situations, this being especially the case within educational institutions. This
can be explained by first understanding the prevailing culture within higher education. Many cultural factors revolve around issues of internal power and dependency between and across functions and hierarchies. Mintzberg and Quinn[6] describe the conflicting forces which exist within the “professional context”, i.e. the context which best describes the educational organization.

First it is necessary to identify where conflicts might arise within this “context”. Within this organizational configuration the key part of the organization is the “operating core”, i.e. the lecturing/academic staff. At Bolton Institute they are horizontally decentralized into six schools. The theory relates closely to the practice in that the “professionals” (academic staff) emerge as highly motivated individuals able to work with a high degree of autonomy in their specialized areas, while exerting “expert power” to influence decisions. Also of note is that senior management lacks formal power and its primary task is to ensure that the organization keeps its “shape”, chiefly by allocating resources and directing on strategy. Senior management forms the “strategic apex” which must co-ordinate closely with the operating core, a role which is becoming increasingly difficult for the following reasons:

- The changing role of management is a consequence of the increasing environmental complexity facing education. Whereas, traditionally, managers could focus on maintaining organizational wellbeing by facilitating the work of the professionals, e.g. validating their proposals for courses, research and other scholarly activity; nowadays their role is much more akin to that of the business manager. In effect they are far more externally focused on markets, legislation and sponsors. Co-ordination is bound to become more difficult because the external demands put on management will conflict with the individualistic motives of the professionals, who will exert their expert power in resisting changes.

- There is a perceived increase in power on the part of management, resulting from legislation, the demise of union power, and a national culture change towards an autocratic managerialism among fledgling “managers” in higher education. This contrasts with the democratic committee processes, which have existed to channel the professional’s demands upwards in the organization, e.g. via academic boards.

- Co-ordination can be stifled crucially by the twin forces of the support staff on the one hand, and the “technostructure”[6] on the other, combining to strangle the link between the “strategic apex” and the “operating core”. This can occur as the “technostructure” pushes the “operating core” towards standardization, e.g. in selection procedures or course formats, while the “support staff” (in this case the administrators) impose bureaucratic systems as a means of control on the “wayward” professionals. In this way the “operating core” can become overburdened with the need to follow procedures which they perceive as being mundane, time consuming and often unnecessary. Such activities are diversionary from their primary tasks and a hindrance to achieving strategic goals.

Mintzberg and Quinn[6] propose two routes down which the “professional organization” can go:

1. The self-interest or “political model”, which is divisive and does not realize the organization’s strategic potential;

2. The common interest or “ collegial model” which is seen as the best route, as it requires people to work together. It is this model which is clearly preferred and which necessitates some degree of team-working.

Most of the outputs from the professional organization are standardized, e.g. courses and qualifications. However, the environmental demands are such that non-standard “products” are in increasing demand. In addition, complexity forces many novel, non-routine problems on to the organization which might best be dealt with by teams. Shaw[7] recognized that “typically several concerned and knowledgeable people will outperform one person in solving problems”.

Two distinct cultures can exist within the professional organization, with the professionals displaying high levels of self-motivation and a desire for autonomy. On the other hand, the support staff’s work is much more highly constrained within functional areas and thus prescribed by management, i.e. more influenced by external motivators. Are the goals of both these groups congruent, or could it be the case that the professionals often find themselves working to support the systems put in place by the administrators?

In order to respond to the pressures brought to bear on the organization a team approach was considered. In adopting this method, it could be that the organization loses its “shape”, with features of Mintzberg and Quinn’s “innovative context”[6] being overlaid. In practice this means that the professionals work together in teams and may have to forge some independence. There will also be cross-functional and “cross-cultural” teams (i.e. professional and support staff) and thus a merging of different elements from
within the context. Yet if Mintzberg and Quinn’s proposition that the professional organization can follow one of two routes[6] is correct, then the only alternative to improved teamworking will be a drift towards the political/self-interest model, which is simply not conducive either to effectiveness or to efficiency.

The aims of the study
A study of an approach to introducing team-working at Bolton Institute was designed to:
• investigate the cultural and managerial features which currently exist within the situational context;
• carry out an audit in respect of communications, planning, training and support for innovation within the situation;
• implement team building as part of a pilot project across a sample of staff;
• raise awareness of quality and team issues within the organization; and
• recommend a follow-up programme.

Planned outcomes
The researchers’ intention was to acquire:
• an evaluation of the special circumstances and characteristics of staff needs and teamworking within a higher education establishment;
• an assessment of the constraints or obstacles to a team approach within the educational setting;
• recommendations for the further development of this aspect of the quality programme for Bolton Institute’s School of Textile Studies.

Overview of research methodology
The ultimate objective of the study was to improve practice within the particular context by means of action research which is “essentially an on-the-spot procedure designed to deal with a concrete problem located in an immediate situation”[8].

Essentially two different types of team exist. Project teams were formed across normal working groups for the duration of a project and to see it through to completion. For example, one team endeavoured to modularize the School’s courses, and another to write a distance learning package. Operating teams were formed as “permanent” units, and comprised people who regularly worked together. Their objectives were to improve efficiency and effectiveness in operations by making changes to their own methods, systems, and environments. A single quality steering team (QST) was established to assess quality improvement suggestions from project and operating teams.

The programme of research activities carried out was:
1 Brief head of School on all aspects of research and discuss logistics.
2 Select a sample of operating teams from the School of Textiles, including the QST, to act as facilitators to the operating teams.
3 Advise the QST on their role, which will include:
   • defining “quality” within the School;
   • setting objectives within the context of “quality”;
   • empowering teams to seek solutions to problems;
   • initiating action towards problem solving and innovation;
   • measuring outcomes against objectives.
4 Hold inaugural operating team meetings with the objectives of:
   • formally launching the team approach;
   • briefing the teams on their roles within the research project;
   • assisting teams in identifying problem areas within team operations and their work and to consider how and why problems are caused.
5 Attend further meetings in the role of observer and/or adviser. It was intended that a minimum of intervention be made, except when specifically requested by teams. Intervention and advice were to be offered in the following areas:
   • team building;
   • problem solving and decision making;
   • communication skills;
   • objective setting.
6 Attend liaison meetings between the QST and operating teams, to observe discussions of proposals.
7 Assess the number and nature of decisions made by teams and reactions of the QST.
8 Analyse problems and barriers to initiating a team approach. Such barriers are expected to be both internal (i.e. to the people involved) and external (i.e. as environmental constraints).

Findings from the action research
A total of 14 structured team meetings were held among five teams, between February and June 1993. Clearly some problems affected the teams. The initial meetings were devoted to listening to members describing the problems which they encountered during the course of their work. As such, the meetings...
Communications
This proved to be the major and fundamental problem area for all the teams. Communication exists in two domains: internally, between team members; and externally, between the team and other teams, agencies and individuals.

Internal communication
Three teams experienced an initial problem stemming from a lack of openness in discussing problems. This was partly due to the misconception that the meetings were part of a management reporting exercise, although a number of underlying personal conflicts also existed between members, which inhibited communication. The result was that a number of “hidden agendas” were brought along to initial meetings such as:
- Individuals determined to exhibit an unwillingness to take part or even a wish to disrupt the meeting;
- Using the meeting as an opportunity to “sound off” about long-held grievances or about unrelated issues;
- Using meetings as an opportunity to demonstrate dominance and formal power roles.

Gradually, it was possible to allay the fears and mistrust as to the purpose of the exercise and also to bring out some of the underlying conflicts. An example of one such conflict was where one person did not accept the authority of another, because management had not made it clear to them precisely what their roles were. This “forming” stage was assisted by adopting the technique of addressing problems in a non-personal way, e.g. by asking the question “what are the attributes of a ‘good’ team?”, and then asking the members to score their own team against each attribute. It was then possible to focus on those areas of particular strength and weakness. For example, within one of the meetings, team members listed the characteristics of a “good” team as shown in Table I, with the mean score against each characteristic shown alongside.

The next stage was to focus on those characteristics which were awarded a low mean score, i.e. which were perceived as being problem areas (points 1, 5, 6, and 7 in Table I). They were then put into a hierarchy of causes and effects which appears below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Mean score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Being able to talk to one another</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Respect for one another’s jobs</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Respect for one another’s capabilities</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Understanding one another’s strengths and weaknesses</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Trust between team members</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Sharing decision making</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Information sharing</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

External communication
The two teams comprising support staff listed similar problems relating to external communications:
- They were not told officially of plans which would affect the pattern of their work. It was only when it came to implementing changes that they found out about them.
- Individual academic staff, themselves not working as members of a team, made differing demands on support staff. Very often this would result in peaks and troughs of workload, with the added difficulty of trying to prioritize as each academic claimed his/her own work to be of most importance.
- With no established medium for communication existing for support staff, it was difficult for them to make requests for changes.
- When meetings with academic staff did take place, it was often as a result of things going wrong. These meetings were essentially for firefighting rather than for real planning purposes.

Haphazard communication structures
As implied earlier, very little in the way of formal communication structures exist within the School. The only formal gathering to take place was for academic staff, and this was used mainly for the head of School to disseminate information regarding issues such as funding, student enrolment targets and results, and course developments. While the meeting dealt with strategic issues, there generally ensued a discussion of other topics, with all and sundry contributing (often with irrelevant comments). As a result, most came away with the feeling that little had been accomplished by the meeting. Support staff were not invited to these meetings.
No time for meetings
Communication was further hindered by the need to fit in the team meetings with the other diverse duties performed by team members, or in the face of more “urgent” work which needed to be done. This is a common feature for many types of meeting in education, where the teaching timetable predominates, with all other activities having to be fitted in with it, thus making it very difficult to arrange suitable times when everyone can attend. Working on several sites makes it even more difficult. Importantly, the fact that teams are not formally recognized and, therefore, that meetings are considered as subsidiary activities by management, usually means that there is a reluctance to accommodate them within the timetable.

Team leadership and skills
At this stage one author acted as the facilitator/team leader so as not to introduce the potential problem of electing a leader from within the teams (unless a clear leader existed, as in one of the project teams), owing to the short time limit for the experiments. This resulted in the teams relying heavily on him to call meetings and organize attendance. However, it quickly became apparent that leaders were needed with the skills to focus the team on customer needs and to use the necessary decision-making tools to produce useful outcomes.

Commitment towards objectives
A number of marked differences were observed between teams in their outlook towards action and objectives. Throughout the exercise the simple schematic “plan - action - review” was proposed to teams as being the best way to proceed. To assist in the action stage, the QST was available for vetting plans in terms of their costs and likely outcomes. They also acted as facilitators in authorizing action, budgets and so on, where necessary.

It was found that project teams were more able to use the plan - action - review method than the operating teams because:

- A project has its own objectives which are more clearly defined than those of the daily work situation.
- Clear objectives are a necessary prerequisite of good planning. Where objectives are unclear or not explicit, then they have to be formulated before planning can proceed.
- There is often a novelty value in projects, which does not exist in normal work situations. In addition, there is a stronger chance of “task closure” which seems to act as a stimulant for participating members;
- Team members have the opportunity to deal with unique and novel situations, involving new tasks and management roles.

These were motivating factors for team members which assisted in achieving successful outcomes and aided the dynamism of the teams.

- Projects involve task closure, whereby outputs can be evaluated, as opposed to continuous improvement of daily routines which are far less easy to evaluate.
- Projects are clearly expected to succeed and team members will work towards successful outcomes so as to feel a sense of self-achievement and to avoid negative feedback from external sources.

In contrast, for the operating teams:
- It was difficult for them to conceive of objectives, especially concerning issues such as quality, customer satisfaction, and internal and external customers, since they had little prior understanding of these concepts. This was partly because they were not embedded within the culture of the workplace.
- They did not have a strategic orientation and thus lacked the experience or drive to consider issues outside their own narrow fields.
- Operational tasks did not contain any predetermined objectives or explicit standards which were to be met. Members of such teams lacked the motivation to improve or change their working practices in the absence of any rewards, i.e., positive feedback from improving their work or the lack of negative feedback from remaining the same.

In addition to the differences between project and operating teams, there were also differences between teams made up of support staff and those comprising academic staff, as follows.

Support staff were far more dependent on management than were academic staff. This supports the theory that more than one culture can exist within a context[6], i.e., that within the professional organization there are elements of the “machine bureaucracy”, which depends on formal management power and hierarchies. The staff in the support functions operated much as they would if they worked in a commercial or industrial organization, only taking responsibility when explicitly given it by management. Their expectations were similarly confined when it came to teamworking. They perceived that teams must be formed as a part of an overall strategy, where they have a defined part to play in making that strategy work, otherwise they lack purpose.

Academic staff were happy working as a part of a project team, but did not work well in one of the operating teams. However, a number of academic staff questioned the need
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Teamworking improves work patterns and outcomes. An analysis of the type of work carried out in the educational context shows that differing roles and skills are required, especially of the professional. The teaching role is traditionally considered to be highly individualistic, involving classroom teaching, tutorials, preparation and pastoral care. Without doubt this is considered the primary role. Yet, even in this role, a team approach is often used nowadays, in order to achieve better coordination and linkages, avoid duplication and to share experiences. Although the professional enjoys autonomy, he/she does not want to feel isolated[10] and seeks working relationships with colleagues to reduce any such feelings. Teaching does not, however, take up all of the working time. Indeed, during an academic year the proportion of time spent in this role may be as little as 40 per cent. The rest of the time is spent in the role of planner and co-ordinator, which involves attending course-related meetings, subject-specific meetings and planning meetings. This is often considered to be the most difficult role, as it involves understanding externally generated initiatives, such as National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), and having to turn such ideas into actionable programmes within the existing context.

A degree of frustration is often experienced within the teaching role, owing to a number of factors: the unstructured nature of meetings and the failure to complete the plan-action-review cycle; having to work at a pace of change over which teachers have no influence; and little credence being given to their professional opinions, especially in areas in which they may have professional expertise. Teamworking would be of most benefit for this role, provided that it is as a part of a structured approach. Creativity would be improved so long as the right environment were created.

Administration and support roles are partly performed by the professional, but are mainly the domain of support staff. The very term “support” implies the need to liaise and to co-ordinate with those whom one is supporting. It also involves being knowledgeable about plans which will require support. Thus interdisciplinary teams would clearly be of benefit in improving the quality of work carried out across the organization. Teams consisting only of sections of support staff could assist in improving the quality of work done within the sections. Their task would be to look for continuous improvement in operational matters, having been given the strategic “lead” from above.

Teamworking improves the nature of work itself. The nature of work includes such personal and environmental factors as the need to be accepted and to enjoy moral and social support from colleagues. Clearly teamworking would improve the possibilities for attaining this requirement and while support from one’s team colleagues will not always be forthcoming, the reasons behind decisions will at least be clear. Feelings of isolation will also be greatly reduced. Increasing the scope of control over one’s close working environment is a fundamental role for quality circles and other such teams. In addition, teams offer both the opportunity to take responsibility and to share it with others, thus reducing the perceived risk in the event of mistake or failure.

A number of limitations to the team approach were also indicated by the study. There is a danger in accepting resistance in the form of negative attitudes and opinions from staff members involved in the study, and immediately concluding that these will set the boundaries for the future. Opposition will generally be encountered wherever and whenever changes are proposed, but this must be overcome by the will and the skill of management in effecting change. A range of limiting factors appears to exist:

- The often-mentioned desire for autonomy from the professional staff, which is a strong reason for many in choosing the teaching profession in the first place. It was not the remit of this research to identify personality traits within teachers, but it is offered as a possibility that many of them have a questioning and reasoning approach to their work which may invite conflict with forces attempting to impose controls.
- Time limitations, brought about by increasing workloads from additional administration and increasing numbers of students, but also because of timetabling constraints which can make it extremely difficult for team members to meet. This problem is exacerbated when one considers the number and variety of teams to which any one person may belong, e.g. course teams, project teams, cross-functional teams, and so on. The very process of attending team meetings may affect performance critically in other areas, not least in attempting to implement any plans decided by the team.
- Deciding the areas in which teams will operate. As implied in the foregoing paragraph, there exists the possibility of employing teams across wide expanses of educational work. This may differ from a conventional manufacturing environment where work is typically done across more narrowly defined and differentiated,
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This effectively precludes teamworking.

1. Teams must exist in the context of a range of quality-related policies. Membership of teams which appear to operate “in a vacuum” can foster feelings of pointlessness. Needless to say, such policies need clear direction and support from top management if they are to stand a chance of succeeding.

2. Teamworking would help academics to reduce duplication of effort, share tasks, and to improve co-ordination in teaching programmes. The lack of co-ordination is often a major complaint from students who experience perceived inconsistencies, gaps, and contradictions.

3. As the scope of work responsibilities in higher education widens and increases in complexity, a joint approach to decision making may often be desirable, because more experience and information is brought to bear on a problem.

4. Co-ordination and understanding between academic and support staff would improve as a result of teamworking which improves understanding of others’ roles and concerns, and provides a focus on mutual outcomes.

5. Training is needed in team leadership and team dynamics and time must be given for team development, which may constitute a major investment and culture shift. These two may prove to be the main constraint and barrier, respectively, to such an initiative.

Implications

We were able to identify some implications for those attempting to introduce teamworking in higher education:

1. It would be wrong to assume that teamworking does not already exist. Teamworking often does exist in an informal way, with a great deal of communication involving negotiation relating to individuals’ inputs into, for example, a programme of study.

2. Formal teamworking occurs naturally in certain situations – principally when related to special projects, e.g. when developing a modular degree course. Such projects involve task-closure and allow team members to undertake managerial tasks which they otherwise cannot do, such as decision making, leadership and allocation of resources.

3. Academics certainly value their freedom, which is mainly centred on pedagogic matters. Attempts to harness them into teams for the day-to-day ongoing running of teaching programmes are perceived by them as “unnecessary”, restrictive, and attempts to control are often resented.

4. The traditional daily schedule of work does not allow time for regular meetings to take place in which all team members are involved – this effectively precludes teamworking.

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