Research Findings

The Critical Role of Teams

Organizations are more networked, more flexible, and more dynamic than ever before. Outsourcing, globalization, and competitive pressures are forcing organizations to rely more on work teams comprised of not only of employees, as well as outside experts or counterparts from allied organizations. And with good reason, no one person has all the skills, experience, contacts, or reputation that are required to get new initiatives up and running.

In Blanchard's® annual survey on pressing corporate issues, 2,044 human resource and organization leaders ranked team development skills as the fourth most important employee development skill for four consecutive years. In order to understand the critical skills and common barriers connected to creating successful teams, The Ken Blanchard Companies® launched a follow-up survey in March 2006 that was completed by 962 HR, training, and operations leaders.

Findings

Blanchard asked a variety of questions to identify how much time respondents spent in team settings, how their organizations used teams, and the biggest barriers blocking team effectiveness.

Fifty-four percent of respondents indicated that they spend up to 30% of their day in a team setting and another 34% spend as much as 50% of their time working in a team setting. Yet 42% responded that they rarely, if ever, receive any training to get their teams off to the right start. A surprising statistic was that only 3% of respondents admitted to a lack of confidence in their ability to lead a team—despite the obvious lack of training on the part of their organizations. However, a team leader's perception of his or her leadership effectiveness may or may not be an accurate reflection of his or her ability.

How Do Organizations Utilize Teams?

Many organizations have embraced the use of teams, and it's not uncommon to hear the statements, "We're committed to building a team-based culture" or "Our organization has moved to a team-based culture." Organizations use teams to address everything from quality and process improvement initiatives to product development and innovation to corporate celebrations. But what are the most common uses of teams? Eighty-four percent of respondents in our survey said that their organization uses teams to handle special projects, while another 74% indicated that department teams and special teams handle innovations and improvements across the board.

How Organizations Utilize Teams	percent responding
To handle special projects	84%
As department teams	74%
For internal systems innovation	74%
For customer service innovation	51%
For product innovation	48%
For employee development issues	37%
To reduce time to market	21%

What are the biggest barriers to team effectiveness?

Clearly, organizations employ teams to tap into members' collective wisdom in order to boost effectiveness and productivity. But simply putting a team in place does not ensure great results. Teams are complex, dynamic, and thriving entities complete with personalities and problems of their own. Thus, relationship and communication issues can often be magnified as the number of team members increases. And launching a team without proper training, chartering, visioning, and goal setting can spell disaster down the road.

Additionally, organizations that expect results simply by putting a team in place rather than providing training to address team member and team leader skills can be setting up the individual members for failure. Sixty-six percent of respondents in our survey cited ineffective communication as the number one barrier to team success, adding that without effective communication, conflicts went unresolved and information about team accomplishments didn't filter out to the organization.

What are the biggest barriers to team effectiveness?	percent responding
Ineffective communication	66%
Lack of effective chartering	56%
Lack of clarity/understanding of roles	47%
Keeping morale/momentum high	44%
Keeping productivity high	42%
Lack of trust	36%

Fifty-six percent of respondents identified the lack of chartering, visioning, and goal setting as deterrents to success. Another 47% responded that lack of understanding about team member and team leader roles was a major deterrent to team effectiveness. Additional challenges noted in the survey included the time spent away from one's "real job," and the lack of clarity and support from top management once a team has been launched. Many respondents also cited that poor leadership derailed team efforts and that a virtual workforce added challenging geographic barriers.

How often does your organization provide training or support in regard to chartering?	percent responding
1–30% of the time	42%
Never	24%
31–50% of the time	10%
Don't know	9%
76–100% of the time	8%
51–75% of the time	7%

How confident are you in your ability to lead a team?	percent responding
Highly confident	52%
Moderately confident	45%
Not confident	3%

What percentage of your day do you spend in meetings?	percent responding
0–30%	54%
31–50%	34%
51–75%	11%
76–100%	2%

What are the most frustrating things about being part of a team?	
Issue	percent responding
Ineffective use of meeting time	54%
Ineffective communication among team members	50%
Lack of accountability	47%
Individuals who don't complete assignments	44%
Lack of preparation in meetings	41%
Not everyone pulls their weight	41%
Lack of process for structuring team and work	39%
Lack of clear purpose	33%
Uneven work distribution	32%
Lack of trust among team members	29%
Time spent away from "real" job	27%
Length of time it takes to get the team up and running	26%

How often does your organization provide training or support in regard to team chartering to ensure a successful team launch?

Fifty-four percent of respondents spend over half their day in meetings, yet 24% of respondents said their organization provides no training to ensure a successful team launch and 42% of respondents said their organization provides training 30% of the time or less.

How confident are you in your ability to lead a team effectively?

Ninety-seven percent of respondents indicated that they were either highly or moderately confident in their ability to lead a team. Yet the third most common barrier to team effectiveness is the lack of understanding regarding the role of an effective team leader. Without training in team leader and member skills, individuals may have a false perception of their ability to function effectively in a team environment.

What are the most frustrating things about being part of a team?

Many of the key issues related to team member frustration include inequity in work distribution, lack of accountability and preparation, ineffective use of time, and a lack of understanding about roles.

Interestingly, many of these can be correlated to ineffective leadership, yet, as stated earlier, most individuals see themselves as either moderately or highly confident and therefore effective team leaders.

However, effective team leaders hold members accountable for coming to meetings prepared, for completing assignments, and they ensure even distribution of work load. If team leadership skills are truly effective, many of the frustrations cited in our study wouldn't occur.

This fact points to the need to prepare both team leaders and team members to play their roles effectively through proper training and support.

Solutions and Conclusion

All organizations are comprised of teams, whether they are ongoing or temporary teams. More often than ever before, work is accomplished through teams as a vehicle for enhancing productivity and profitability. Empowered teams accomplish more in less time and with greater cohesiveness than individuals working alone. Therefore, businesses find that teams are a critical method for facing the challenges of globalization, increased competition, and ever-evolving technology. Companies form teams for different reasons, but most teams are created to solve problems and ensure that an organization becomes more flexible, effective, and competitive. However, simply putting a team in place is no guarantee it will produce results. All teams need support and training in order to help them work effectively and productively.

First, it is critical that team members and leaders are trained in effective communication in order to promote the free flow of information within the team and out to the organization. Interpersonal group skills are also critical for people working in a group setting. Team leader and team member roles and team dynamics must also be addressed when preparing a new team to be successful.

Second, a team chartering process assists in conceptualizing a personal vision for where the team members want to go, what they want to accomplish, why they exist, how they will work together, and what the end results will look like. When this is in place, team vision, purpose, and values which crystallize and energize the team far more quickly.

Teams support the implementation of participative organizational cultures by providing a development process and the team skills that result in higher productivity and greater satisfaction. Organizations that provide the proper training and support enhance their chances of creating a team-based culture where creative decision making, better working relationships, and more effective feedback result in increased organizational effectiveness and flourishing productivity.

About The Ken Blanchard Companies®

The Ken Blanchard Companies® is a global leader in workplace learning, productivity, performance, and leadership effectiveness that is best known for its Situational Leadership® II program—the most widely taught leadership model in the world. Because of its ability to help people excel as self-leaders and as leaders of others, SLII® is embraced by *Fortune* 500 companies as well as mid-to small-size businesses, governments, and educational and non-profit organizations. Many Blanchard® programs for teams, customer loyalty, change management, and leadership effectiveness blend the use of assessments with instructor-led and online learning. Using best practices based on the company's continual research, Blanchard's world-class trainers and coaches support people in making the shift from learning to doing and drive organizational and behavioral change into all levels of organizations. To learn more, visit www.kenblanchard.com.

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