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Managers want tribes, not teams

A real team is a group of people who win or lose together

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Bill Inoshita/CBS

In the past 20 years "teamwork" has become so cliché in organizations that every group is now a "team." Consultants and managers are constantly looking for improved "teamwork." I sometimes get called in to work with senior "management teams" after previous attempts have failed to create any more teamwork. As I survey the wreckage of well intentioned efforts, it seems obvious that many consultants and managers need a new way to think about what managers who want improved "teamwork" are

really asking for.

Teams, Tribes and Federations

There are three different kinds of managerial groups: teams, tribes and federations. When most managers say they want more teamwork, what they really mean is that they want to turn a federation into a tribe.

What's a team

A real team is a group of people who, given the structure of the situation, win or lose together. Each relies on the others in the team to accomplish their tasks and goals. It is not possible for one person on the team to "win" and the others to "lose" -- they all succeed or fail together.

Most managerial groups aren't structured that way. More often, each manager who reports into a senior manager has a sphere of responsibility that is his or her own. Take the typical HR department. Whether or not the compensation and benefits manager is succeeding at his or her job seems to have little to

do with the actions of the training manager, or the manager of recruitment, or the employee relations lawyer, and so on. A group like this finds typical team building activities at best, a fun diversion, and at worst, an annoying distraction from their work. It's not that such departments can't be structured like teams -- they can. It's just that most aren't so they don't really feel any purpose in pretending to be teams.

Why then is there such a constant demand from senior managers for "team building"? What managers want is for the people who report to them to take the needs of the whole into account and be willing to put the needs of the whole ahead of the needs of their own departments. I've found that in many management "teams," if you dig into their mental maps, this is what "teamwork" really means.

What's a federation?

A common type of managerial group is best described as a "federation." In a federation, representatives of various groups and interests meet together, usually to try to manage common resources when there is not enough to satisfy everyone. When the separate managers who report into an executive

each feel that their job is to protect the interests of their departments, to maximize their access to budget and other resources and to promote agendas consistent with the aims and perspectives of their departments, you have a federation. It's not unusual for federations to be rife with conflict, constant politicking and an inability to achieve consensus. This is probably why managers of federations would like it to be different and want more "teamwork."

What's a tribe?

A less common type of managerial group, and the one I think many managers are looking for, can be described as a "tribe." In a tribe, everyone has their own sphere of responsibility, but each role is required for the well-being of the community and each person is attuned to the well-being of the community. People's competence and "success" in their role is judged individually but few would put the greater good of the community at risk for their own personal success. Structurally, people win or lose individually

but that's not how people feel about it. They have emotional ties with the rest of the community that makes them care about how everyone else does as well.

What makes a federation into a tribe? The key is the extent to which people identify with the group. It's not about goals or roles or procedures -- though they can be helpful in the identification process. It's about how much one feels a sense of belonging to the group, how much membership in that group is a part of each manager's personal identity. Before a person identifies with a group, any group is one more element in their personal environment that can be an opportunity or a threat in the pursuit of their personal needs and goals. But once a person identifies with a group, they take the needs and goals of the group into account as well. In those groups that people highly identify with (say, their family) people are even willing to sacrifice their own needs for the group's needs.

Managers often don't want their reports to act like a federation -- even though a federation model can be more effective for the common good than tribes or teams. Instead, managers want reports to act like a tribe. This may generate greater harmony, but sometimes it might be more effective to keep the conflicting interests and points of view that characterize a federated system and create paradoxical tensions that help ensure a more resilient, more vigilant and more vigorous organization.

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