

High Performance Teams Enable Mission Success for SRNL – 16363

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ABSTRACT

The accomplishment of the DOE EM mission of cleaning up the radioactive waste generated as a byproduct of the development and maintenance of nuclear materials over the last 60 years is a daunting task. SRNL specializes in working directly with the “owners” of the cleanup challenges to identify the desired outcome and develop a solution that can be put into practice. “We put science to work” is not just a “tag line” rather it is a concise statement of our values and approach to applying science and engineering to the cleanup objectives. The management of radioactive waste poses multi-decade challenges to DOE EM and the Nation. The ability to harness the depth of knowledge, experience, expertise and passion for safely and effectively solving the technical challenges has reached a critical junction.

Perhaps too late to be a natural and organic transition the industry finds itself critically devoid of resources to effectively and efficiently keep focused on the highest order task: cleanup. When project managers plan the resources necessary to perform the planned scope they typically are focused on financial, human, and industrial resources that would be beneficial to project execution. The critical shortage we will be evaluating is experienced and skilled leaders, mentors and coaches in the workforce.

The production of educated scientists and engineers is a primary focus at all levels of educational institutions with Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) focused curricula beginning in elementary school. The need for leaders who are skilled in inspiring organizational creativity, adept in harnessing and focusing individual energy while effectively communicating to the work force and the clientele equally compelling messages, has never been greater, or their absence in the workforce more ominous. Managers trained in the classical management theory (*insert references here*) are aging out of the workforce. In many cases these managers have not retained close connection to advancements in their primary field of study but rather have succumbed to the administrative burdens that typify highly regulated work. The current technically trained workforce while interested in the “perks” of management (i.e. visibility, pay increases, advancing status) are driven to keep close connection to their technical “roots” as a fall-back plan should they need to change their career path either by choice or necessity.

The challenge is how to achieve the productive hum of a finely tuned organizational model that blends executive vision and drive with technical leadership and excellence in execution. If any of these three tenets of a high performance team falters the ability

to recover erodes the performance of the team and begins to weaken the cultural foundation essential to sustaining high performance work teams.

At SRNL, recognition of the need to adapt the management dynamics and the business model and to harness the energy of the workforce to sustain - and in fact increase - the level of performance is a driving force in the transformation of the organization. Examples of changes in organizations structure, business systems and employee engagement are discussed as they relate to the impact on accomplishing the cleanup mission and fostering the next generation of great leaders and innovators.

INTRODUCTION

High performance teams can be created or can occur organically. The awareness of and intentional development and use of these teams to assist in changing an organization's dynamics and set the stage for wholesale culture shift will be discussed from various perspectives. The ability to understand the organizations objectives and considerations necessary to place the right people in mission critical functions to enable success on both the individual and organizational level is the focus of leaders who desire change and embrace growth.

METHODS OF DETERMINING TEAM DYNAMICS

Management Dynamics: Organizational Changes

Faced with expanding clientele locations and supporting diverse missions the Savannah River National Laboratory (SRNL) has adopted an organizational structure that recognizes the need for a focused and agile project team while aligning with the classical laboratory structure for execution of hands-on scope. The need for the clients – both local and distributed - to see the availability of staff to support their needs and execute the agreed upon scope has been critical in developing sustainable relationships. The staff involved in this matrixed structure are adapting to the developing structure while staying aligned with the balance of their colleagues executing scope within the typical line management organization.

The need for enhanced communication has resulted in development and implementation of tools and techniques that are a combination of project management tools (i.e. resource loaded schedules, formal scope development and accompanying cost estimates, etc.) to ensure that all potentially impacted components of the organization have a shared understanding of the priorities, the risks and the impacts of performance on the future of the laboratory.

Business Model: System Adaptation and Modernization

The business model used by the SRNL is one that was put in place anticipating the primary and nearly singular client population that would be the tenants at the Savannah River Site. The relatively new “national laboratory” designation at the time of the awarding of the management & operations (M&O) contract did not contemplate significant growth outside of the Savannah River Site’s (SRS) Environmental Management (EM) Mission. *(Insert contract references here, clauses and specific wording if applicable)*

As the SRS mission expanded to uniquely serve critical National Security and Clean Energy mission elements, it was recognized that for the benefit of various federal agencies and programs the Savannah River Site was not in fact an “EM Closure site”. The growth of enduring missions in business areas beyond EM has caused awareness of the need for a flexible business framework to serve the needs of various clients, provide fiduciary continuity, and comply with complex accounting rules. The development and use of such a flexible framework is not a straightforward task, involves a large number of organizations and must be implemented with great attention to detail.

The transition phase of bringing new systems and tools into use has proven difficult, as it occurred at a time when, as a result of declining federal budgets, involuntary separations were necessary. The added complication of the specified reporting, necessitated by the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA) funding, set in place yet additional prescriptive reporting requirements that had not been contemplated in the initial M&O contract. The need to develop and implement a highly integrated and automated financial system was clear.

The ability to respond to the mandated changes helped accelerate what would typically have taken many years to build and put in place. The time frame associated with the ARRA funding upended the normal process and through a directed change of practice also required a significant culture change. The new cultural model for change identification, development and implementation is one of integrated project teams that represent the entire value stream of the system and are driven by continuous improvement objectives.

Workforce Engagement: New Leaders and Managers; Vision; Ownership; Empowerment

The SRS and SRNL was one of the last DOE EM sites where repeated and significant contractor changes had not occurred. In the 60 year history of the SRS it is reported that there had really only been two contractor changes. The level of engagement with the workforce during the transition and subsequent implementation of the new M&O was unprecedented.

As is common in the DOE EM complex the workforce is aging and reaching retirement at an alarming rate. The infusion of new workers, let alone managers and leaders, is viewed as a significant risk to technical continuity and the ability to sustain the level of

success enjoyed by current and previous workforces. As time has passed, the commitment to developing aspiring scientists and engineers into world class managers and leaders became less of an intention and more of a fortunate byproduct. As the science and engineering professions have continued to evolve, the separation between critical management skills and technical competencies has increased. The importance of business, communication and social skills has been left to chance rather than recognized, rewarded and encouraged in the technical business units.

SRNL found itself at a critical juncture where the business situation mandated expansion through the development of client relationships, yet the focus had been to bolster the technical competencies without intentional regard for training and mentoring high potential scientists and engineers to build effective teams, identify business opportunities and capture the business. Success has come through repeated success in the execution of highly complex technically challenging tasks in an outstanding fashion. The challenge before us is replicating the past and moving forward with intention to perform in an agile and technically superior manner. SRNL is essentially trying to write the book as we are living the story.

DISCUSSION OF TEAM CREATION AND ESTABLISHING MOMENTUM

High Performance Teams: What Are They and How Do We Build Them?

Mission focused results have been hailed as the reason for repeat and expanding business, and in fact provide the underpinning for SRNL's pride in being the DOE EM premier applied science national laboratory. So how does this happen? Is it coincidence, dumb luck, or careful and thoughtful planning... and how can it be replicated? Starting with the easiest answer first...yes it can be replicated...not easily but it can be done. The observations made over the past three years indicate it is coincidence, luck, and careful and thoughtful planning: the art comes from striking the right balance at the right time with the right people.

At the core of developing a high performance team is recognition of issues needing attention. If there are no "issues", what is the driving force for change? SRNL has learned that when certain symptoms appear frequently, it drives the organization's leadership to look closely at what the future holds and how to best prepare to meet it head on. A few of the symptoms include increased demand for competing resources (human & financial); questioning time-honored administrative processes; and straying from past performance. There is a notable increase of interest (both positive and negative) regarding how the current scope links to future mission needs. These symptoms are indicative of a workforce that senses the need for a change in approaches but feels stifled by the "bureaucracy" of the status quo.

At the risk of over-generalizing, the workforce that is reluctant to embrace change seems to fall into a few categories like: belief that "it's not broken"; sub-optimization of project execution and hoarding of resources; and less than full participation in alignment of expectations and decisions. The ability to harness the energy of both

the high energy a change oriented worker to those that prefer to maintain status quo into one team with a unified and clear goal proves to be a more powerful tool for driving change than a manager issuing an edict and expecting a change in team performance.

Result Oriented Teams are High Performance Teams

Common objectives serve as a unifying force for highly motivated individuals. Few things are as gratifying as working alongside a colleague “who gets it” and is ready to work with you to tackle the tough job. Many of the people who gravitate toward the seemingly impossible tasks are those who demonstrate consistent and reproducible performance. These people may be seen by others as having some similar personality characteristics: driven, persistent, courageous, impatient, etc. What sets them apart is the ability to use their strengths to compliment the team goals while recognizing others have ways to help the team achieve more.

Managers and leaders of these types of people find easy successes when they integrate work functions with a purpose. The ability to see synergistic benefit and bring people together with a common vision helps overcome “routine heroics” and builds teams that anticipate the needs of the customers, can predict potential bottlenecks to performance, and identify changes to a process rather than relying on “work-arounds”. Once the natural rhythm of the team begins to form, all members start contributing to excellence in execution and the team’s performance sets them apart from other teams. The management team of an organization can serve as a force-multiplier by seeking additional ways to increase synergy between work groups and rewarding efficient and effective execution.

Culture Shock: Change is Constant - Growth is Optional

Rarely will everyone in an organization agree that a change is necessary. In fact the norm is for people to question what’s wrong. I know ‘my’ project customer is happy; ‘my’ regulator is happy; I’m getting ‘my’ scope done; and why is it ‘your’ concern? If organizations were able to reflect on their operational metrics - whether they are leading or lagging - what trends would they see that could confirm “everything is great, no change is necessary”. Does flat-line mean everything is fine? Well of course not - a flat-line means, well... nothing: no change, no growth, no decline, no energy. Could it also mean no future?

To be successful in the DOE EM industry, change is necessary. New approaches that retire the Environmental Management legacy in a time-efficient manner requiring the least amount of long term care while improving the sustainability of the remedy, are beneficial changes in the current management approach. The ability and willingness of DOE to share responsibility with the contractor workforce and the community for

determining innovative ways to carry out the mission demonstrates respect for differing technical approaches while encouraging new ideas. Creating an atmosphere that is conducive to change is a self-perpetuating cycle. Once the risk versus reward for taking a risk and trying something new is seen, others are eager to join the quest for breakthroughs.

Creating Momentum

As teams are pulled together and gain a sense of common purpose they begin to seek understanding of each other's roles. As the team members gain an understanding that they have a shared objective and they each bring specific attributes to the team, a renewed sense of value and heightened level of contribution is evident. The satisfaction that comes with knowing you've been selected to work on a mission critical team because of your unique attributes indicates that previous performance has been noticed by management; your contributions in the new area are deemed valuable if not essential for the new mission to succeed and the expression of trust to serve the organization carries with it a sense of pride as well as duty.

Organizational leadership reinforces this by announcing the formation of the team, communicating often and openly what the team is chartered to accomplish and engaging in dialog with the rest of the organization as to how the new team and mission success will benefit the overall organizational objectives. The communication from management to the organization about the new team is nearly as important as the selection of the team.

The reward system used to acknowledge the contributions of the team to the organizations goals and an account of how each team members roles was integral to the success builds a sense of accomplishment and helps the balance of the organization to see the benefits and values of going the extra mile for the sake of the team and the organization as a whole.

A caution to management is to appropriately commission these teams is to ensure that when staff members are selected to participate that they are given appropriate support and relief from the standard job duties. Assignment to a high performance team should be considered a new assignment not an added assignment. This differs from an assignment to a team commissioned to address standard types of organizational needs. These types of teams are in fact added assignments and have the opportunity to showcase specialty skills staff members may have that are not routinely used in their day to day assignments. It is through successful participation in these teams that employees become known to the management team and have the potential of being called to serve on a high performance team.

The distinction between high performance teams and ad hoc organizational improvement teams is an important one. Overuse of either type has the effect of diluting the effectiveness as well as burning staff out on taking on added duties. The employees then develop a strong adverse desire to “help management out” by taking on added work with no real benefit received or understood. The key to effective use of either high performance or ad hoc teams is to use them sparingly, make their objectives known and communicate often the progress they are making and how it supports the organization as a whole.

CONCLUSIONS OF THE UTILITY OF HIGH PERFORMANCE TEAMS

What next?

Development and use of high performance teams as a viable approach to resolve the especially complex or immovable barriers to mission progress empowers talented professionals to step out of their comfort zone, contribute in meaningful ways and learn from each other. Recognizing that these teams are typically focused around a problem or a set of similar problems enables a “review board” to stand up a team based on risk management needs and demonstrates agility in organizational learning and growth.

When an organization encourages learning through focused teams the culture that is reinforced is one that embraces principles of accountability, commitment, healthy conflict, and trust. The challenges that face DOE and its contractors require personal and organizational endorsement of innovation while standing fast on the historical commitment to safety and security of the nation’s interests. Future generations are relying on the current workforce seeking approaches to deliver on the clean-up of the nuclear waste legacy in a credible and sustainable manner.

REFERENCES

Contract and clauses from page 2.