Sociometry in Organisation Development

Exploring the informal network of relationships in groups

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A case study: *Mapping the informal network of relationships to facilitate the merging of four groups into one, aligning with their shared purpose.*

BACKGROUND

Between 1988 and 2003, this company grew from 20 people to 500. Recently, the company developed from being regionally based to becoming a national organisation, with three divisions and four corporate service groups. I was invited by the manager of one division to assist him in uniting four distinct sub groups into one communications team. These subgroups comprise seventeen people from four areas: delivery services, sales support, production planning and invoicing. There were three team leaders. The purpose of the new team was to ensure the on-time production of jobs by liaising between the company's sales team and the company's customers; essentially providing a better capacity to deliver to their customers.

Display 1 - The proposed shift in structural relationships
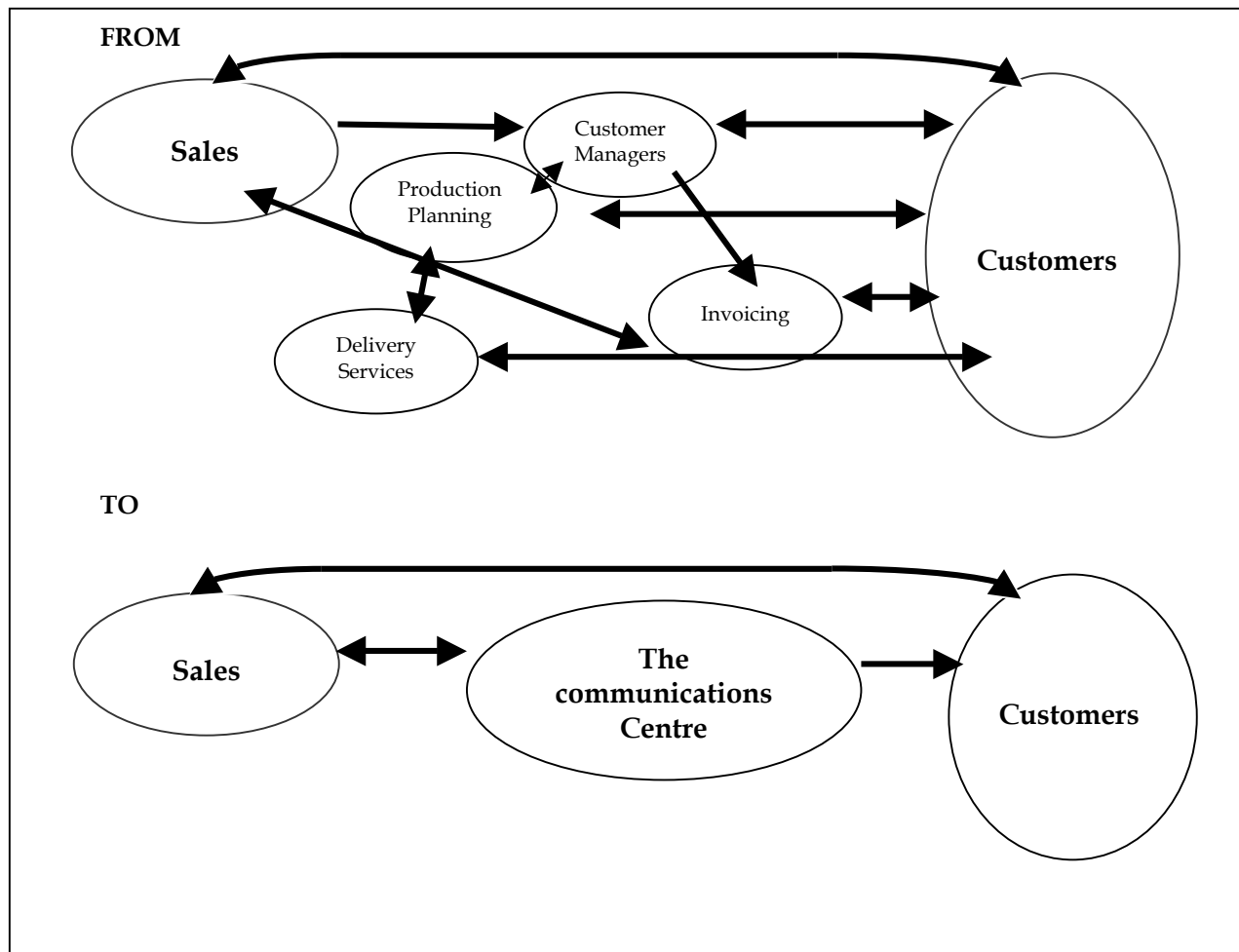
The new manager noticed the sub groups were reluctant to get together. He relates a history of frustration, unmet expectations and negativity between the different teams. He reports a tendency for some team members to feel special and others to feel invisible, and this is causing friction. We established the outcomes he wants from the project.

OUTCOMES BEING SOUGHT FROM THE PROJECT

♦ To be a happy and functional team so that staff want to come to work

♦ That staff cope well with the changes ahead including the shared physical environment

♦ Staff are comfortable with each other and understand their different responsibilities, and deliver to both internal and external customers

♦ That staff support each other as a new team.

DECIDING TO EXPLORE THE INFORMAL NETWORK OF RELATIONSHIPS

Knowing some of these people have worked together for a number of years I wonder what is behind the reported negativity and reluctance to get together. I suggest we use sociometric processes and explore the existing network of relationships.

The manager and I come up with criteria likely to develop reflect staff's current relationships with one another, and their purpose in getting together. The criterion we choose is '*Who in this group can I rely on to help me solve a work problem I might have when we're in the new team*'.

THE NEXT STEP

The next step in the intervention is a series of discussions with team members to discover their way of thinking, and some of the skills, experience and attributes they are bringing to the new team. Within these meetings, each person completes the sociometric assessment on the chosen criteria.

WHAT THE DISCUSSIONS REVEALED

The meetings were lively and open. Staff wanted to see five outcomes achieved:

1. **Clear definition of responsibilities –** "*the grey areas to be defined, especially where it's no-one's job, but it has to be done.* "

2. **Communication –** "*we share information versus chasing around trying to get it. Not expecting people to know when they haven't been told*".

3. **Manager and team leaders relationships –** "*we can raise issues and the manager/team leaders are available to us. Don't let problems hang around.*"

4. **Team qualities –** "*knowing you can rely on people to help when you are overloaded. And, with a large group of busy people who rush around a lot – the need for some privacy and our own space.*"

5. **The barriers of 'getting together' so we are no longer 'us and them' are addressed**

   The interviews revealed three examples of 'us and them'

   • Some staff (sales support & production planning) were closer to the managers and had better working conditions than those downstairs.

Naturally, the resulting data and map contains valuable and relevant information. Some of our assessments are included here.

This sociogram (Display 2) indicates many team members had a large number of positive problem solving relationships; four of the seventeen people had mutual (two-way) relationships with more than half the group, (2, 10, 13 and 15). You can see in the display, these people attract many arrowheads. This means they chose more than nine people in this category and were chosen by the same people as mutual problems solvers. These four people hold the key to the information flows within the group and are likely to know what is going on within the group. What is relevant here is person 2 is one of three team leaders. While perceived as being in the 'them' team, she is a central player in the informal network of communication.

Others were more selective in whom they chose (e.g. 1, 8 and 9). Specifically, 8 is a team leader who made five choices and received eleven. Only two of these choices were reciprocated. One interpretation of this result is that while staff see him as responsible for problem solving he had yet to enact this as a shared role. He relied on people who were not able to solve problems. Practically, this meant problems sat on his desk.

While team leaders 2 and 8 chose one another, and were chosen by team leader 3, they didn't choose team leader 3.A number of her choices were unreciprocated. Whatever the reasons for this, it is apparent she was perceived as being unavailable on the chosen criteria of problem solving. Usually individuals to receive a large number of choices but whose own choices remain unreciprocated, feel isolated. These results, reflected in the sociogram directly relate to three of the outcomes being sought:
  ➢ Communication
  ➢ Manager and team leaders relationships and,
  ➢ Getting together rather than 'Us and them'
The need to generate a shared approach to problem solving amongst team leaders was now apparent. There was a gap between the healthy informal network of relationships and the formal team leader structure. The neutrality of two team leaders towards the third, now needed addressing amongst the team leaders. They noticed this too.

The unreciprocated choices of many of the team members confirmed what many had been aware of - while they might take a work problem to someone, it was more perceived as a complaint and problems tended to hang around.

Here in lies a core difference between social network analysts and sociometrists. While it is possible for managers and others to make these assessments of the sociograms (the maps), what is generated with the sociograms is both personal and group information. This is not managerial information although it is valuable information for managers too. One implication of collecting relationship information is the consultant needs to work skilfully with those participating as they gain insight, process and apply what they are learning about themselves and their relationships. As a sociometrist I believe the key to organisation change lies in developing the role relationships amongst the team members resulting in changes in behaviour.

How did we approach this? With our assessment in mind, everyone was given the sociogram and his or her individual results in the first team session. Team members were:
  • Interested
  • Alerted to their relationships, and
  • Excited by what they saw.

After responding to and working with their individual and group information, we explored the dynamics of one-way choice, mutual choices (you choose someone to solve a work problem with and that person chooses you) and the desirability of mutual choices for collaborative group behaviour. Team members became more

conscious of relationship dynamics and had a model for developing their relationships. They realised they tended to focus more on what wasn't working so well rather than what was working well. They saw the power of the informal network and how their behaviour affected their functioning in the informal network. The team culture began to shift.

MORE SOCIOMETRIC METHODS WERE USED

During the team sessions, sociometric methods were utilised to work with the dilemmas the group had identified including:

➢ Action mapping the new job tracking system, including time lines, concretising processes, benefits and pressure points so everyone understood the implementation process and their role in it
➢ Identifying and mapping perceptions of 'us' and 'them' and refining who to go to for what
➢ Action sociograms to create the seating plan within the new work- station configuration using the criterion *'who would I want to sit near so I can be more productive.'*

In the final team development session we made the second assessment of the relationships using the same criterion as earlier. This was done, with everyone in the room, seeing one another and making their choices. The results of the second sociogram showed three key developments. Firstly, 12 group members increased the number of choices they made. Secondly, fifteen of the 17 had more mutual choices than three months earlier. Thirdly and most compelling were that 13 of the 17 team members had nine or more mutual choices within the group.

These results indicate team members:
➢ Became more expansive in their choices
➢ Were perceived to be more available to others to assist in solving work related problems
➢ Increased their acceptance of people's different roles and their inter-relatedness, and
➢ Had greater willingness to help each other.

Noticeably, each of the team leaders and the manager had more mutual choices. The manager and team leaders were more alert to and available to problem solve amongst themselves and with others, and were perceived to be so.

SUMMARY

The underpinning sociometric processes used ensured participation was structured around exploring, understanding and building the informal network of relationships. As a result of this work, team members became more open with each other and quickly took on the notion of working together better, leading everyone towards the results both they and their manager wanted. The increase in mutual relationships enabled problems to be solved more readily.

Team leaders felt more enabled to solve problems with staff rather than come up with all the answers themselves. Everyone had greater confidence in both their specific contribution and their collaborative relationships with others. They felt better informed and involved with innovations and developments within the new group. Well-structured sociometric interventions assist group members explore and develop their patterns of relationships and enhance their experience of working together.

Based in Wellington, New Zealand, Diana is Managing Director with The Organisation Development Company. She has worked as an organisation development consultant and group facilitator in a range of public and private companies for over 20 years. Her special focus is enabling executive teams achieve better business results through addressing interpersonal connections and team behaviours.. Diana is a Sociometrist and Trainer, Educator, Practitioner with the Australia New Zealand Psychodrama Association. E: dianaj@orgdev.co.nz Tel: +64 4 499 5559 **Post**: Box 1441, Wellington 6001, New Zealand.