

Leading Self-Directed Work Teams: A Guide To Developing New Team Leadership Skills

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Article:

The author states that "the rapid infusion of new technologies, new worker expectations, and customer demands of the last few years have not fit well with the restrictive job boxes, status-laden levels of hierarchy, and narrowly focused functions of traditional organizational thinking." What is needed in this "second industrial revolution" a new organization and a fundamental change in employer values and employer attitudes toward the worker.

Far too often, organizations have—under the guise of being results oriented—focused on controlling rather than enabling the worker. The cost of this control is a bureaucracy that slows innovation, de-skills workers, and reduces employee motivation.

Kimball Fisher offers the self-directed work team as one path toward achieving the organizational flexibility and responsiveness needed to compete in the marketplace. Members of these work-centered teams take direction from the work itself, rather than relying on procedure and supervision. This approach encourages initiative and risk-taking, within the framework of an overriding mission and an overriding sense of purpose.

The book is targeted to the leader of the self-directed work team (SDWT). Although "self-directed work team leader" seems to be an oxymoron, it is a role that is clearly needed. The SDWT leader procures resources, represents the team, problem-solves, and coaches team members. In the traditional organization, the leader schedules work, coordinates departmental activities, and implements improvements. Instead, the SDWT assumes these responsibilities.

Parts one through three of the book explain why we need SDWTs, and what fundamental attitude changes are necessary for their implementation. The author then turns his attention to defining the role of the team leader. He lays out a schedule for role adaptation and identifies problems that will likely be encountered.

This book does not depict the shift from a traditional hierarchical structure to an SDWT as a panacea. The author's experience indicates it generally takes three years to reap the substantial benefits (lower costs, higher quality, increased productivity) of SDWTs. Productivity may actually decline in the early years, as the unit devotes time to employee education and as members struggle to define their roles. Additionally, the company will need to expend resources to realign information flows, focusing on getting information to work teams rather than gathering information to support controls.

The author cautions us that employers should not jump on the SDWT bandwagon without a realistic expectation of time and initial costs. Implementing an SDWT without the resolve to stay the course is an expensive undertaking and will sour employees on another attempt to implement the SDWT. The author acknowledges that for some organizations the required culture change is so severe that it makes a successful transformation impossible. He doesn't offer these organizations a solution, but he notes that history is replete with the carcasses of large organizations that were unable to adapt to a changing environment.

The author has considerable experience in SDWTs, including as a member of SDWTs and as a consultant on their implementation. As a result of his experience, the author provides a balanced treatment of the subject. Fisher can state, with authority, that the switch to the SDWT approach is a transformational, painful, and lengthy process—even when implemented correctly. This experience strengthens the book's usefulness as a reference for potential team leaders. The book not only prescribes measures for effective team leadership, but also anticipates problems that a unit is likely to encounter in each phase of transformation.

Fisher's presentation is excellent and engaging. He explains concepts clearly, and illustrates applications with real-life examples and vignettes interspersed throughout the text. A concept is introduced, often by example, and the text that follows seems to anticipate the reader's questions. Simple, easy-to-read tables summarize key points, often contrasting the traditional paradigm with the SDWT philosophy. The practitioner will find these useful for understanding the philosophy, as well as its application.

The book closes with a pair of evaluation tools. The first is used to determine if you have what it takes to be a team leader. The second is a behavioral frequency test to determine the effectiveness of a team leader.

Although reward systems are not the book's primary emphasis, the author reminds readers that developing a reward structure to support the SDWT concept is critical. But here the author fails to give the examples and prescriptions of effective and ineffective actions so readily available for other key points in the text. Perhaps a sequel is in order.

Overall, this book provides a compelling argument for considering self-directed work teams. Organizations considering implementing an SDWT approach should buy this book for their team leaders.