cross-unit cooperation

Horizontal collaboration, knowledge and information sharing between sections of an organisation

Collaborative efforts between organisational units facilitates the pooling of assets, personnel, and equipment to improve problem-solving capacity, cross-fertilisation of ideas, organisational learning and new knowledge creation through information sharing. Leveraging the expertise and knowledge held in different parts of an organisation has become critical for organisations to maintain a competitive advantage through innovation, to deliver superior customer service and to improve employee engagement.

suggested actions

- **identification of needs and barriers** Understand the needs of different areas and diagnose the factors contributing to low horizontal cooperation, information sharing and communication, through mechanisms such as a survey, focus groups or interviews. Specific data will help the definition of a targeted approach. Ongoing review of collaborative processes allows future changes to be made.

- **leadership support** Observable leadership support of inter-team cooperation is critical for encouraging positive collaborative employee behaviours. Leaders should clearly communicate the value of cross-unit cooperation to achieving team and organisational goals as well as model the behaviours expected. Leaders can also eliminate identified barriers, such as redefining competing work goals, reducing competition for resources and clarifying cross-unit role responsibilities.

- **building organisational commitment** Building a strong organisational brand and identity that is consistently reinforced helps to encourage affiliation with the organisation over team loyalty alone. Leveraging high involvement HR practices can facilitate the alignment of employee interests and their willingness to engage in activities that support the wider organisation. For example, training and development opportunities signal the organisation's interest in employees' long-term growth and increase employees' belief in their ability to engage in expected behaviours and contribute to the organisation.

- **goal alignment** Creating similar levels of interdependence between organisational units to achieve work objectives can help overcome perceptions that one function is more important than another. Setting clear goals and accountabilities while minimising competing goals will ensure that individual team objectives do not impede employees from collaborating with other organisational areas.

- **reward and recognition systems** Expected behaviours need to be outlined and evaluated directly as part of the performance appraisal process, signalling to employees the importance of these activities as part of their role. Consider structuring incentive and/or recognition schemes that recognise collaboration and cooperation with other departments/units within the organisation.

- **cross-unit contact** Creating opportunities for horizontal face-to-face communication can foster trust and respect between areas, reduce ingroup biases and improve intergroup perceptions, which can increase employees' willingness to coordinate with others outside of their immediate team. More structured opportunities for employees to engage with those outside of their immediate team can be created through cross-unit project teams, training to facilitate organisational learning, networking events and job rotations.

case study

When researching initiatives to improve cross-unit cooperation in organisations, we came across a comprehensive partnering program that Sydney Water had embarked on to improve the way Operations and Maintenance (O&M) worked together to deliver services to its customers. Despite strong O&M performance, engagement and ownership was low, lines of accountability were unclear, and collaborative relationships were lacking. Sydney Water's goal was to attain long term process and business improvements, and achieve O&M excellence through trust-based collaboration. Sydney Water have been generous in sharing the key initiatives they implemented to achieve this goal.

As part of a broader change management program, a multi-faceted partnering strategy was implemented by the organisation to engage leaders and staff at all levels in O&M and improve relationships. The first stage was the creation of an Operations and a Maintenance Division with clear accountabilities to work collaboratively as equal partners towards the common goal of O&M excellence. Governance was, and still is, key in driving and maintaining change momentum. In the four months prior to launching the new divisions, and for several months afterwards a Program Leadership Team (including General Managers [GM], O&M Business Improvement Managers, Partnering Program Manager, HR) met weekly, now fortnightly to oversee the O&M change management program.

Post the restructure, the partnering program began. Starting at senior levels, both divisional executive teams participated in a foundation workshop to develop a Partnering Charter, to which everyone signed their name. The workshop served to drive leader alignment through the development of joint objectives, accountabilities and behaviours. The key messages from the workshop were communicated to staff through GM roadshows. The roadmap was supported with a simple story board designed so that it could be used on the back of a truck with pen and paper. Using pictures as well as a story board supported different communication and learning styles.

Next followed a series of engagement workshops with the leadership teams, after which employees at all levels participated in partnering workshops to cascade the importance of collaboration through the organisation. Employees were accredited as facilitators of the sessions, which helped to foster involvement and strengthen employees' sense of ownership.

The workshops focused on: exploring the highlights, lowlights and 'rub points' of the O & M partnership; assessing the health of the relationship through a survey; identifying the desired target state for the O & M relationships; and action planning for making improvements. Leaders were responsible for refining action plans following the workshops and completed plans were posted to the intranet to improve transparency and accountability. Monthly follow-ups were implemented to maintain traction. Six to nine months following the initial workshop, a review workshop was conducted to acknowledge progress and address remaining 'rub points'. An annual relationship survey was also implemented to measure progress, and each employee had partnering KPIs incorporated into their performance development plan.

Additional communication channels continue to be leveraged to maintain focus on partnership objectives. Examples include an online community of practice; toolbox talks, regular O&M update emails to staff, a staff Maintenance Improvement Suggestion Scheme and regular GM roadshows where leaders across both divisions in the depots and plants present back to the GM on what they are doing to achieve agreed objectives.

A number of follow-up measures indicate significant improvements since implementing the organisational restructure and the partnering strategy including: a consistent increase in the quality of working relationships between operations and maintenance since the 2009 baseline, a decrease in customer complaints with Sydney Water's product from 3,542 in 2009 to 1,872 in June 2011 and an increase in the reliability of assets and processes, with July 2011 showing the best performance to date. Performance metrics that have remained static are the focus of ongoing strategies.

useful resources

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