



Self-directed teams: An organizational change.

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The vision of self-directed teams

Self-directed teams (SDT) or self-managing teams is a development originating from the 1950's. Nowadays, self-directing is a popular concept, both in organizations and in educational setting (van Amelsvoort, 2018). It is gaining popularity because managers try to find a solution for the growing complexity in western organizations (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Self-directed teams can be defined as a group of employees that work cooperatively every day. They share responsibility for collective activities and teams have autonomous control over managing and planning to ensure quality of product or service for their clients (Goodman, Devadas & Hughson, 1988; Jans, 1999; Tjepkema, 2003).

Fewer layers of management are needed than with traditional structures and the organization flattens which makes it more efficient and productive (Felts, 1995; Attaran & Nguyen, 2000; Douglas, Martin & Krapels, 2006; Tjepkema, 2003). SDT's are more efficient because smaller groups appear to be more ideal for communication, as the information flows more efficiently and decisions can be made faster (Helbing, Ammoser & Kühnert, 2006). This means that a team does not receive instructions from management. Instead, control of managers is reduced and given to the teams (Douglas, Martin & Krapels, 2006). This self-management creates a sense of ownership which is not present in a traditional setting (Alper, Tjosold & Law, 1998). SDT's are responsible for operational and regulatory functions which provides the team members autonomy and freedom and results in innovation (Tjepkema, 2003). Workers in a SDT therefore have a broad range of skills to successfully finish the group task (Janz, 1999). At a Dutch home-care company "Buurtzorg", workers in a team have one main role; nursing and divide the other roles among each other in the team such as; housekeeper, informer, developer, planner, team player and manager. By dividing these roles the team can work autonomously to manage the organization context e.g. planning, hiring, salary but also adapt the care to the needs of the clients instead of being bound to rules and protocols (Corporate Rebels, 2018).

Furthermore, employees in a SDT feel a high responsibility towards each other and the goal. They are likely to be more committed to a goal as they do not want to disappoint their colleagues (Pfeffer, 1998). This responsibility feeling and trust has a positive effect on initiatives and effort in the workplace and provides an amount of freedom (Attaran & Nguyen, 2000). However, high trust may also threaten the performance of a team. When there is a high autonomy, monitoring should be taken into consideration (Langfred, 2004). Also Langfred (2007) found that conflict in teams has a negative effect on interdependence and autonomy. Therefore, it is important that employees obtain interpersonal skills to properly communicate

and collaborate (Strydom, 2002). Changing to SDT's ultimately leads to higher quality, improved productivity is cost-effective and improves market competition (Goodman et al., 1988; Boonstra et al., 1996; Doorewaard & Brouns, 2003 Cohen and Ledford, 1994; van Amelsvoort & Scholtes, 1999; Tjepkema, 2003).

The change strategy to achieve self-directed teams in organizations

Self-directed team members have to acquire several competences, in order to perform successfully autonomously and with each other. These competences can be divided in three categories: (1) operational, which are needed to perform tasks that occur on a daily basis. (2) Social competences, for effective communication within teams, also known as interpersonal skills and (3) improvement/learning competences to learn innovating and knowledge sharing between teams (Tjepkema, 2003).

The employees have to be ready to participate to develop a need that evolves into an educational need (Kyndt & Baart, 2013). It is essential that the vision of the change is accepted by employees as this is seen as a key driver in organizational change, because it leads to the intention to participate in training (Whelan-Berry & Somerville, 2010; Kindt, & Baart, 2013). According to trainers/consultants it is common to provide team training for the following reasons; (1) Individuals can learn from, motivate and inspire each other and (2) It enhances the dynamics in a group and feelings toward the company (Sessa & Londen, 2015; M. Fijnaut, personal communication, July 17, 2018; D. Porter-Stowe, personal communication, June 18, 2018). The team training is focused on transformative learning. The aim is developing a new understanding through reflection and experience and more importantly by 'doing' in an interactive setting (Martin, Kolomitro & Lam, 2014; Sessa & Londen, 2015; Bron & Hubers, 2018). This requires trainers to construct a program based on the companies and employees needs and wishes in which trainees set their own educational demand of what they want to learn as the experiences and context in every company are different (Kyndt & Baart, 2013). During a special SDT training by AVK and AGTS (business management training corporations) there is a focus on values, collaboration, responsibilities, reduce ego, realize space and appreciation, communication, conversation skills, give and receive feedback, which are interpersonal skills (M. Fijnaut, personal communication, July 17, 2018; D. Porter-Stowe, personal communication, June 18, 2018; Just, 1999). In team training these skills can be well addressed as it is within a social environment and people learn by doing and communicating. However, this can only be achieved if all the members are engaged and motivated (Martin, Kolomitro & Lam, 2014).

In the AVK training the employees are made aware to think of their own technical skills and need to consider if they need more expertise in other areas. These skills are also known as the operational competences (Tjepkema, 2003). It is expected and encouraged to independently acquire those skills within a company or find an external training (M. Fijnaut, personal communication, July 17, 2018). This requires autonomous behavior of an employee. This awareness relates to generative learning as the individual is expected to learn new knowledge and skills. However, this should come from the motivation of the individual itself (Sessa & Londen, 2015; Bron & Hubers, 2018). This is in line with formal learning in the shape of training as the employee is ought to find the training within the company or follow an external training or workshop (M. Fijnaut, personal communication, July 17, 2018; Bron & Hubers, 2018).

Arguments for self-directed teams.

Organizations have to deal with a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world (VUCA) in which they continuously adapt to the context to prevail (F. Peters, lecture, May 28, 2018). Shaffer and Zalewski (2011) state that organizations see benefits in workers that continuously develop skills, adapt to changing context and autonomous workers that can cross boundaries instead of only their own specialization to accommodate to a VUCA environment. Vaill (as cited in Olson & Eoyang, 2001) describes that human judgment, creativity and passion are needed to adapt to the complex world instead of a high degree of leadership or management. To cross boundaries, workers need a broad range of skills (Shaffer & Zalewski, 2011) and according to Janz (1999) a successfully implemented SDT contains workers that are motivated to develop skills in broad range. However, the demands in a boundaryless job are high and workers need help to develop in knowledge, skills and attitudes (Shaffer & Zalewski, 2011; Tjepkema, 2003). Providing more freedom and autonomy with self-directed teams will eventually result in innovation and flexibility (Tjepkema, 2003). Wilson & Lawton Smith (2016) state that self-managing can be linked to confidence, increased communication skills, self-awareness and greater responsibility which would be beneficial to handle a VUCA context. Therefore, taking all of the above into account, we are convinced that organizations will benefit of the implementation of SDT's.

Arguments against self-directed team training.

The positive aspect of a team training is that people learn by doing with a high interaction level. This is beneficial and adds to the learning of the learner, especially when also receiving feedback. It contributes to motivation and adds to interpersonal skills such as collaboration,

discussion and insights (Martin, Kolomitro & Lam, 2014). However, specific information about training programs was limited. Also, trainers provided shallow information. Trainers claim to adjust to the needs of the organization, instead of providing a complete, fixed program. As Vaill (as cited in Olson & Eoyang, 2001) states, trainers have tried to be inventive in order to adapt organizations, but this has been ad-hoc and intuitive, not systematic. They claim to understand the needs of the organization, but this is just an assumption. Even if trainings are rather successful for implementing SDT's, these experiences are not shared or published while this could be an opportunity to enhance more companies by trying to generalize successful implementations. Therefore, with the current information that is general and not quite specific, we do not support the change strategy for this organizational change.

Conclusion

The vision of SDT's fits today's playing field very well. We are convinced most organizations will benefit from working in self-directed teams. Therefore, we would advise organizations, dealing with complexity, to implement self-directed teams with a substantiated program based on research, not just intuition. Also, it would be an opportunity to share successful implementations to learn from organizations that have become self-directed.

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