

The measure of a team



Sebastian Macmillan, construction sector programme manager at the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, explains how a simple matrix can improve your teamwork

It is to be hoped that the new

government pays as much attention to the built environment as the last one did. Since 1997, construction has gained the attention of the Construction Task Force, the Urban Task Force and the government's strategy for sustainable construction. These reports identified a need for the sector to improve the quality of the built environment, to raise construction efficiency and to become more socially and environmentally responsible. An interesting aspect of the changes expected of the industry is that they were largely concerned with people-related issues – with organisation, management and human resources.

Making the matrix

Large numbers of individuals and organisations are involved in the processes that lead from demand for a building to its eventual handover. In the same way that the performance of a building is as much about the junctions between components as the components themselves, so the performance of the project team is as much about effective teamwork as it is about individual expertise.

In a research project at Cambridge University's Department of Architecture – and with the support of the DETR and the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) – we reviewed the management literature on teams and worked with leading organisations to study their experience. We have tried to identify the key issues that are indicative of good teamwork practices. These include:

- well-selected team members
- co-ordinated effort, and sharing of tasks evenly across the team
- good communication and open exchange of information; and
- a sense of common ownership of the task at hand and shared responsibility for its achievement.

We have tried to use the key issues as the basis of a simple benchmarking tool, the

teamwork matrix. It is divided into columns which identify five key aspects of effective teamwork: team building, communication, conflict resolution, collaboration, and reflection and self-assessment. Each area is then marked from 0 - 4, with 0 signifying minimal progress towards best practice.

To use the matrix, choose a column; then find the description in the cell which best describes your teamwork practices. Mark this with a cross. Do the same for each of the other columns. Joining the crosses will give you a profile of team effectiveness. It will help you to see how balanced your team management is and identify which aspects of teamwork could be improved.

Peaks in the profile indicate where your team management is well developed, troughs where there is scope for improvement. The overall aim is to take

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management actions to move your team towards a balanced profile across the top row, which represents best practice.

The matrix is not, of course, comprehensive. Selection of team members can be critical. Some members – typically those who are prepared to negotiate options and explain their assumptions and decisions – will work better in teams than those who prefer to

work unaided. Again, those who are willing to put the interests of the team before their own, and to accept that the outcome of the project is the result of a joint effort, are likely to function better in teams.

Reflection matters

Leadership is also an essential ingredient. The best team leaders help the team to identify shared objectives, keep participants focused, ensure the team has the resources and information it needs, create opportunities for all members to contribute and avoid blaming individuals. Leadership is implicit in the matrix, but the temptation to give it a separate column has been resisted, since this would tend to reflect on an individual.

Perhaps the most important column of the matrix is reflection and self-assessment. Construction teams tend to focus exclusively on the product they are working on, and rarely recognise the value of talking about how they work together – the “process” of teamwork. Yet team development can be enhanced by self-reflection. Reviewing from time to time the interaction between team members can lead to identification of problem areas and potential improvements. Self-reflection can address different priorities among team

members and the factors that cause a team to stray from its objectives. The matrix is intended to support this process. Team members can complete the matrix and then compare their results. The team might also work the matrix regularly to see if it is progressing towards best practice. **cm**

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