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Drowning in Co-operation

Want to give yourself an extra productive day every week without spending any more time at the office? You can do just that – and improve job satisfaction for yourself and others – by cutting out unnecessary teamwork, reducing communication and relaxing central control.

It may sound unorthodox, but after spending 12 years working with and observing the ever-more complex team structures of over 200 of the world's leading companies, I am convinced that these are the keys to faster, simpler ways to manage people, projects and teams.

Why? Because successful companies grow. As they grow, they become more complex and it takes more time and effort to get things done. Eventually complexity undermines what made the company successful in the first place. The old, entrepreneurial spirit breaks down, bureaucracy increases and progress slows.

Four key management myths lie at the heart of all these delays and dissatisfaction.

Myth 1. It's all about teamwork

Even great companies are struggling with an epidemic of co-operation. The symptoms are unnecessary teamwork and boring meetings.

Team working is no longer a technique but has become a "corporate value" in many companies. After decades of encouraging what I call "spaghetti teamwork" where everyone is involved in everything, too much cooperation is now holding us back.

In complex multi-site, multi-cultural, matrixed and virtual organisations, teams are expensive and difficult to run. When we add the constraints of working through technology (do you love your weekly team conference call with 16 colleagues?) it is hard to work collectively.

Participants at our online survey tell us that they spend more than a third of their time in meetings - more than half of which they don't really need to be attending at all. This meeting overload ties up something like 20 per cent of all management time - and it achieves almost nothing.

A particular favourite is activity reviews where individuals tell you what they did last week. These consume around an hour per week of time for many teams and is usually of no interest or use to anyone.

I recommend much more individual or simple group working. Most activity in organisations does not need teamwork.

Myth 2. Communication is the answer

I met a manager in California. His team was behind schedule with a project. He described their day. Conference calls morning and evening with their global colleagues; nearly 100 emails per person per day; a team briefing weekly and local site and project meetings to stay in touch with developments.

When I asked him what he thought the problem was his answer made me laugh aloud. "I think it's a lack of communication".

Lack of communication is a problem of the past. The challenge now is how to disconnect from the mass of trivia and see the few really important messages.

The average manager in our survey receives 57 emails per day and tells us they only 25 of these are necessary to do their jobs. This may not seem a lot on an individual daily basis, but it means that the average FTSE Company pays its people to write, send, read and delete over 240 million pointless emails per year.

We recommend a structured process for disconnecting from unnecessary communication and that companies appoint a specific person to be responsible for managing email use – something that consumes another 20 per cent of all staff time in some companies.

Myth 3. We need to be in control

Decentralising control and information in manufacturing has given us a quality revolution over the last 15 years. But over the same period, management control in other areas has become more centralised.

As a result, a third of the managers we surveyed thought their company already had too much central control and more than four out of 10 felt it was moving in this direction.

There are powerful forces that undermine trust in complex companies. Colleagues are in a different location and from a different culture, they don't respond as fast or in the way you expect so – better just check...

This is causing a damaging cycle of micromanagement and low expectations, something made all the worse by government regulation. It is harder to empower others when getting it wrong means leaving the building in handcuffs.

I believe that local control is real control and central control makes slower and often worse decisions. We need to build local capability systematically to allow us to do this in a managed way.

Myth 4. Corporate values hold the company together

The nature of community at work has changed. It is more diverse and less based on a physical place, yet companies still invest in traditional "team spirit" and "corporate values".

The "keys to community", (including building relationships, shared culture, shared experiences and face to face time) have changed. We have to realise that some of these keys are not available to us and others are just too expensive to apply.

We have to focus on the keys we can use and change our expectations of community at work. I meet a lot of managers who constantly feel guilty that they cannot achieve the "team spirit" they were used to in the past now their teams are in multiple locations.

Companies spend tens of millions of pounds on corporate values – but values are set at an early age and are very resistant to change. In any case, what right have you as a company to insist I change my values?

But what is also clear is that in the search for faster cooperation, a superficial set of common practices does work and, paradoxically, is actually more inclusive than respecting cultural differences. There may be lessons here for wider society.

Most traditional team working, communication, leadership and meetings trainings still carry inaccurate assumptions from a much simpler management past. And this leaves managers having to try harder and harder to apply these obsolete skills to more complex organisations.

The answer is not working harder with the old skills but implementing faster and simpler ways of working.