The San Diego Zoo: Self-Directed Work Teams

Description

The San Diego Zoo has, over the past few decades, developed a world-class reputation for its care, treatment, and assortment of animals. As its reputation developed, so did its organizational hierarchy, to the point where, by 1980, there were 50 different departments, covering such disparate functions as animal keeping, gardening, construction and maintenance, and fund raising. This organizational structure did an effective job of handling the responsibilities inherent to the needs of a traditional zoo, which usually separates animals according to species, e.g., birds are kept in a bird community, reptiles are housed with reptiles, and so on.

In the mid-1980s, however, the San Diego Zoo decided to rethink the traditional zoo layout. The zoo recognized its ultimate mission as one of conservation, working to preserve the various species on the planet as well as their areas of natural habitat. Zoo management felt that the most effective way to do so, within the confines of a zoo, was to educate visitors about the animals and their natural surroundings. With this in mind, the San Diego Zoo began to redesign its layout, building bioclimatic zones that mirror, as accurately as possible, the wildlife settings in which the various species are found.

Hand-in-hand with this new design concept came a new organizational structure. While a traditional zoo could target the skills of its animal keepers, horticulturist, and the like around the zoo as needed, the bioclimatic zones were essentially self-contained biological menageries, with various plant and animal forms existing together in a natural setting. As such, each bioclimatic zone required a variety of skills and care specific to its environment. Rather than have, for instance, a horticulturist tend to the plants in one zone on Tuesdays and Thursdays and another zone on Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays, zoo management decided to create teams charged solely with the responsibilities for a single zone.

In 1988, the first of these self-directed work teams was formed in conjunction with the first bioclimatic zone, Tiger River. Team members were selected through a volunteer screening process, which measured technical and communication skills as well as the potential to work in a self-directed environment. Eleven candidates were ultimately selected, coming from a variety of departments, including animal keepers, building and grounds, construction and maintenance, and gardening.

The Tiger River team, though led by a senior curator, was given wide latitude in developing operating procedures and practices. The team analyzed work flows and organizational interactions, and members received extensive training on teamwork and interpersonal relations, as well as formal and informal cross-training so that individuals could share functional knowledge with other team members.

By the time the Tiger River zone opened, the team was able to work on an independent basis. The team was given administrative responsibilities over its operations, which included planning and tracking budget expenses, creating work schedules, identifying and filling staffing needs, and setting work goals based on its analysis of work requirements. While individual members were still responsible for their own area of expertise, the cross-training enabled team members to handle a wide range of problems as the need arose. There was still an occasional need for “outside” help from the zoo’s centralized departments, but the team performed so well that this assistance came on a case-by-case basis, rather than a full-time basis.

The success of the Tiger River team did not automatically segue into universal approval for self-directed work teams at the zoo. Department managers were wary of the consequences of losing their best employees to such teams, and union officials were concerned that the “skill generalists” would render the 97 job classifications at the zoo obsolete. The zoo’s response to the union was that the professional

employees approved of the team concept, and since it was good for the professionals, it must be good for the union.

The concerns of the department managers were a different story. When the time came to form a team for the second bioclimatic zone, Sun Bear Forest, the managers redesigned the selection process. Rather than have employees volunteer for the new positions, department managers selected their own employees and then assigned them to a cross-functional team. Although these employees were members of the Sun Bear Forest team, they still reported to their original department managers. While the purpose of this was to promote cooperation and unity between departments, the effect was to undermine the teamwork of the unit. Individual responsibilities were unclear; team members had no say in establishing goals and priorities; conflicting individual schedules made it difficult to hold team meetings; department needs took precedence over team needs; and some team members did not want to work on a team.

After a prolonged period of ineffective performance, the Sun Bear Forest team achieved a state of autonomy similar to that of the Tiger River team. Those team members unhappy with their situation returned to their original departments, and their positions were filled by volunteers selected by the remaining members. By refocusing its efforts on visitor satisfaction and animal care, the team achieved measurable gains in job performance, job satisfaction, and departmental cooperation.

The lessons of the first two self-directed teams influenced the team formation for the third bioclimatic zone, Gorilla Tropics. An advisory group of concerned department managers reviewed the start-ups of the first two teams and solicited input from all corners of the zoo. Applicants for the third team were carefully screened for technical, social, and problem-solving skills, and, once selected and trained in teambuilding activities, the team was given the same autonomy as the Tiger River team. A similar process was used to create the fourth and most recent team, in charge of the Kopje Corner bioclimatic zone. The San Diego Zoo plans to complete the transition from departments to self-directed work teams by 1996.

While it is difficult to quantify the performance of these teams across the wide range of their functions, those results that can be measured have been decidedly successful. The average cost of a workers' compensation claim in a team area in 1991 was $1,786, compared with $5,121 for a claim in a traditional zoo department. Absenteeism has dropped dramatically among team members; in one three-year period, a self-directed work team of nine members reported just one sick day. Guest attendance, even in down periods in the southern California entertainment industry, continues to rise.

On a more subjective scale, employee surveys at the San Diego Zoo reflect a high level of satisfaction among team members. Team members like their jobs; their ownership of the responsibilities gives them a personal stake in those areas and instills a sense of pride in their performance. Visitors to the zoo are impressed with both the displays and the overall knowledge shared by team members. It's not unusual to find a "skill generalist" from building and grounds explaining the particular habits of a mother Sumatran tiger to a guest.

The combination of bioclimatic zones and self-directed work teams is certainly paying off for the San Diego Zoo. As Doug Myers, Executive Director of the zoo, explained in a 1992 interview, "When you see someone eager to get to work who has been here for 10 or 12 years, you know you are doing the right thing. We can tell that the animals like it more, too, because of the way they act and the increase in their reproduction rate. That's a telling sign." For an organization committed to the conservation of wildlife on this planet, perhaps that's the best sign of all.

Learning Points

Self-directed work teams provided the San Diego Zoo with the best strategy for conserving its animal and plant collection while offering guests the highest quality education the zoo could provide. While gradually eliminating the traditional zoo hierarchy, these permanent, autonomous, cross-functional teams are achieving significant gains in a number of areas. Satisfaction is up among both guests and employees, the plants and animals are thriving in the bioclimatic zones, and the cross-trained team members are able to deal with problems as they arise as well as cover for teammates who are busy elsewhere.

In general, self-directed work teams are at once both an extension of the organizational culture and a departure from the previous way of doing business. The teams are selected by senior management and then guided and advised by managers, who are not members of the team. The day-to-day operations of the team, however, are handled by the team rather than by department heads. The cross-training eventually eliminates the need for handoffs for tasks within the borders of team responsibilities, creating an "all for one and one for all" work environment.

Discussion Questions

Question: What are self-directed work teams (SDWTs), and what do they do?

Answer: Self-directed work teams are small, permanent groups of employees who:

- assign jobs within their area of responsibility
- plan and schedule work
- make production-related decisions
- improve and/or design their work processes
- take action on problems arising within their assignments
- design and improve their own work processes
- set goals and monitor team progress
- schedule and plan the work
- develop and manage the budget, which includes determining the profitability of the team's functions
- identify and meet customer needs
- design, produce, sell, and distribute products and services

Question: What are some of the conditions that must exist for successful implementation of self-directed work teams?

Answer: Successful implementation of self-directed work teams relies upon a number of critical factors, including:

- **Clear, measurable goals and accountability.** Goals should be aligned with the organization's business plan, and there should be clear, detailed areas of accountability for the team and for each member of the team.
- **Senior management support.** Without a united management front in support of the new policy, work teams lack a clear direction and can falter, as evidenced by the San Diego Zoo's second work unit, the Sun Bear Forest team.
- **Extensive training.** Learning the job skills of a variety of other team members requires in-depth, often lengthy training; similarly, developing the necessary team-building and team interaction skills is best done through a formal, concentrated study approach which complements the on-the-job training.

- **Measurement devices.** If something can be measured, it can be managed. Positive measurements can also be used to buttress arguments in favor of work teams. Those areas which should be measured include (but are not limited to):
  - customer satisfaction
  - customer loyalty
  - employee job satisfaction
  - revenue
  - expenses
- **Communication.** The goals of the team should be clearly understood by the team as well as by the organization as a whole; those goals should be directly aligned with the organization's business plan, both as a matter of common sense and as a means to elicit support for the team's success.
- **Continuous growth and improvement.** The team should learn from its experience as well as from the experiences of others. Benchmarking visits to other organizations using self-directed work teams can offer insights and lessons that may be overlooked by those too involved in their own processes to recognize potential opportunities. All of this information can then be shared with the organization as it develops a culture of self-directed work teams.

Question: What roles should the leaders of the organization play in the development of SDWTs?

Answer: The organizational leadership is responsible for creating and supporting a new way of doing business, which includes developing a climate of employee trust and empowerment. Among the steps that the leaders must take include:

- designing teams for success
- selecting team players
- facilitating the transition to new management roles
- providing extensive training for team members
- rewarding team performance

Question: How does an organization design SDWTs for success?

Answer: To design teams for success, organizational leadership needs to:

- educate senior management on the process as well as the benefits of SDWTs
- conduct an SDWT readiness assessment
- clearly communicate the vision and the values of SDWTs across the organization
- redesign the workplace to align the new system with both the business goals and the business processes
- provide a continual evaluation of the progress of SDWTs

Question: How does an organization facilitate the management transition?

Answer: The leadership must clarify the changing management role, which will now become that of a facilitator and teacher/coach/mentor. Leaders must provide management with training in coaching and mentoring skills, and management must be involved in the process for change.

Question: How should the new team-performance reward system be structured?

Answer: A reward system based on team performance should be of a gain-sharing compensatory nature, taking into consideration:

- the depth of the team's performance, i.e., the specific process skills developed by all the team members
- the breadth of the team's performance, i.e., the range of processes learned by each team member
- the leadership skills exhibited by each team member