

Flatten The Pyramid

Use Self-directed Teams To Manage Incompetents Rising Too High. Part 3 of 3

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Somebody has to do it

Employees are often promoted to their level of incompetence. Often, those employees would like to step back to a position where they were successful but can't. Their ego may get in the way, the position may have already been given to someone else, or the company may not know how to handle such a request. Smart companies recognize the damage done to their organization by leaving people in a position at which they are incompetent. They use Performance Management to move them sideways, if possible, or back down. If Performance Management doesn't work for you, or if you want out-of-the-box thinking, consider self-directed teams as an alternative.

Self-directed teams

Self-directed, or self-managed, teams are not new. Their utility in business situations is well documented. One aspect of the value of such teams that is often overlooked, however, is their ability to effectively manage the competency levels of the team members.

Self-directed teams are frequently created within traditional business organizations either to address cross-functional issues or to promote employee empowerment. They also are found in non-profit companies and in non-business organizations, such as social clubs. One of the more recent appearances of self-directed teams is in "virtual" corporations.

"Virtual" corporations

"Virtual" corporations are formed when several individuals, or small companies, band together to pursue a business opportunity. Usually it is an opportunity for which that the individual or small company could not successfully compete on their own. This can be due to lack of specialized expertise or simply lack of size. By teaming with others, they can overcome their handicap.

These virtual corporations are a prime example of how self-directed teams manage incompetence. The teamings are usually short-term, like the business opportunities they pursue, but are often repeated frequently. A group of 10 individuals may have a long term understanding, which allows them all to work together smoothly. On any given team, a smaller number of group members may participate based on the opportunity. Which members participate changes frequently, depending on the needs of the group.

In cases like this, an individual or small company simply will not be included in those opportunities for which they are not qualified. The group self-selects the best members for the opportunity. Incompetents just are not selected.

If the team continues to select an incompetent, perhaps because he is the only one in the group with a specific area of knowledge, the group will not be able to compete as effectively. In time, they will either cease to exist or they will replace the incompetent with another individual with the level of expertise needed. Self-directed teams can function in this same manner within a company.

Flexibility required

There are many requirements for a self-directed team to be successful. In terms of managing the competence levels of their members, however, the key requirement is flexibility. The team has to be given authority to add or remove team members. This does not have to be total authority. The company can, and should, place guidelines around the process. However, the team must be given sufficient latitude to adjust the composition of the team that they can achieve their objective. If they have this latitude, and if they are committed to achieving their objective, they will either exclude incompetent members or they will move them to a position where they can contribute.

Flatten the pyramid

Self-directed teams are one way to flatten the pyramid. Others should be explored. The more we can remove the hierarchy from the organization structure, the less pressure there is on an individual to continue to seek promotion to "higher" levels, even to levels for which they doubt they are qualified. We also provide an opportunity for individuals to move laterally in their search for challenging, fulfilling work rather than always having to move "up". Finally, there is less resistance on the part of the individual to moving back down, and there are a greater number of options for the company that needs to move someone to a different position.

Manage This Issue

The flatter the pyramid, the greater the flexibility you have to manage. Don't create organizational levels that are not required. Take full advantage of self-directed and matrix teams in your efforts to flatten the pyramid. Not only will you get a more responsive organization, you will be able to limit the number of individuals who rise to their level of incompetence, only to get stuck there.