



## Articles & Commentaries



### p-Watch — Australia



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#### Teamwork, Leadership, and Productivity

Some years ago, author of *The Team Handbook* Peter R. Scholtes was in Australia educating top managers on aspects of teamwork. Spending some personal time in his company was a pleasure. His more recent book *The Leader's Handbook* prompted me to look further into what well-known management educators, researchers, practitioners, and commentators have to say about teamwork and leadership.

Peter Scholtes states: "More than 95% of your organization's problems derive from your systems, processes, and methods, not from your individual workforce. Your people are doing their best, but their best efforts cannot compensate for your inadequate and dysfunctional systems." That is a very strong productivity statement that we know to be true. He further says, "We look at the heroic efforts of outstanding individuals for our successful work. Instead we must create systems that routinely allow excellent work to result from the ordinary efforts of ordinary people. Changing the system will change what people do. Changing what people do will not change the system."

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"Certain common management approaches— management by objectives, performance appraisal, merit pay, pay for performance, and ISO certification— represent not leadership, but the abdication of leadership," Scholtes asserts. In an organization, how does this present itself? Let us take two management examples: A manager who is firmly entrenched in the old paradigm would say, "Behind every problem, there is someone who screwed up." However, a top manager who has developed a systems view would observe, "Behind every problem there is an inadequacy in the system."

The new approach to leadership began in Japan in the 1950s. Scholtes acknowledges the great contributions to productivity improvement by Deming, Sarasohn, Juran, Ishikawa, Shewart, and many others. It is not surprising to find that Scholtes believes very strongly in teamwork as a tool to improve management and organizational productivity. There is no better evidence than

the success of quality teams, quality control circles, process improvement teams, and project teams in world-class organizations.

Fast forward to the contemporary views about teamwork and shared leadership. Some condensed beliefs and comments from renowned management luminaries such as Peter Drucker, Tom Peters, Stephen Covey, Ken Blanchard, Kenichi Ohmae, Peter Senge, Gary Hamel, Michael Hammer, John Naisbitt, Warren Bennis, and Rosabeth Moss-Kanter illustrate modern practice. Based on their research and observations, there is a consensus view that teamwork is not a new management fad, but a fundamental strategic reorientation by enterprises seeking to become globally competitive. In seeking to meet or exceed customer requirements, top management recognizes team-based work as a way of life in the enterprise. The days of the “all-knowing, do-it-my-way managers,” if any still survive, are gone or a remnant of past bad management practice.

The challenge for shared leadership implied in team-oriented organizations is how to ignite the collective spirit of people, their intelligence, commitment, and perseverance. Peter Senge talks about “working at our best” versus “not working at our best.” He observes that we do best when we “care about” what we are doing, which leads us to learn from our experience, build our confidence and the desire to achieve, and stimulate excitement and respect. On days when we are not working at our best (and we all experience those), if we care about what we do we will still have a positive outcome. In teams, Senge comments, we find people realize that they need each other. If they are difficult to convince, he suggests that key questions to ask are why do I care, who depends on you, who do you depend on to get something done, and what is my job? Very soon people will recognize that they are part of a team.

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Stephen Covey stresses the importance of trust and its output trustworthiness for successful teamwork. He also emphasizes the importance of relationships in building trust and being able to count on each other. Richard Kearns encourages developing a “can-do” attitude in teams, finding out how things can work better (process improvement), and pushing decision making down the organization (empowerment).

These commentators speak about the fundamental importance of education, skill formation, and communication to enable teams to function successfully. Ken Blanchard noted the need to recognize various strengths and weaknesses in the team composition, and to build on the strengths to let stars shine. An advantage of robust, dynamic teams in an organization is that people feel more secure, particularly in times of rapid change, because of the shared vision and values in the group.

Supporting teamwork, John Naisbitt emphasizes that the real competitive edge in an enterprise is the quality of its human resources, thinking individually but acting globally. Global thinking and alignment across the whole enterprise and beyond aids in understanding the impact or interdependency of team decisions.

Clear communications play a vital role in underpinning successful teamwork. I was reminded of recent work I undertook in leading a team to develop and deploy an innovative technical customer relations management support tool

among a technical sales force. The development team was scattered throughout different cities and locations and in different time zones. As teamwork was embedded in the organization and a way of life, it was expected that teamwork would apply in meeting all aspects of timeliness, cost, and quality. Although a “virtual team,” it had all the attributes of a face-to-face team. The new productivity improvement tool delivered faster, more flexible customer service and greatly improved the management reporting system.

An important observation to note from Kenichi Ohmae is that new ideas do not often come from teams. They are usually the province of technicians or R&D experts. However, he comments that improving on the ideas and implementing and deploying innovations in the workplace require teams. To avoid being “team happy,” he warns that there is a time, place, and occasion for teams. Stephen Covey and others comment that management should not set unrealistic expectations for teams. They all agree that they need nurturing, support, training, and education to ensure that the mindset and skill set are in alignment. Leadership in teams should be encouraged to ensure proper functioning and decision making, otherwise they can become a talkfest with no value or output.

Because organizations are now flatter and need to be faster, flexible, innovative, and adaptive, it is not surprising that world-class organizations see the need to embrace teams and teamwork for competitive advantage and productivity improvement.



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