



Self-managing teams: debunking the leadership paradox

Is leadership superfluous in a self-managing team? Aren't self-managing teams supposed to be self-sustaining and self-sufficient?

Paul Tesluk, Associate Professor of Management and Organisation at the Robert H. Smith School of Business at the University of Maryland, wants to correct this misconception.

“Self-managing teams are not as rare a phenomenon as what they used to be. By definition, a self-managing team is a team that has formal responsibility and authority for making their own decisions about how they organise their work and how they decide on how they're going to get their work done.”

So instead of a having a formal supervisor with that responsibility, “it's up to the team to decide how they structure themselves and how they go about organising their work flow and process,” Tesluk explains.

Different leadership traits



Paul Tesluk

Although self-managing teams can be found, particularly in flatter organisations where teams are encouraged to be more independent, some form of leadership still needs to be in place. The type of leadership, however, is quite different from that of the traditional team, with a leader at the helm.

Tesluk says the leadership style within a self-managing team is far less directive, but more inspiring and even visionary. Here the leader develops team capabilities to be able to make decisions, understands how to best organise and structure team workflow, and figures out how to manage roles and responsibilities.

To get to this advanced phase, an element of team formation is required – and the importance of finding an effective leader cannot be overstated.

A delicate balancing act

But when it comes to self-managing teams, leaders have to balance what Tesluk calls the “authority balance beam.”

“You have to walk that carefully and delicately, and use careful judgment as to when to intervene and when to back off and allow the team ... even to make some mistakes that they can learn from and continue to develop,” he explains.

Even so, self-managing teams are not de rigeur for every organisation. Tesluk says this structure works best in teams which tend to have high levels of knowledge and expertise within them, such as service technician teams.

His research shows that these technicians are highly professional, highly skilled and also able to organise their own work.

“They didn't need, and it was actually counterproductive to have a supervisor tell them how to go about doing things like figure out ‘how do we handle customer calls as they came in and develop some kind of call queuing strategy. Or how do we manage our parts expense budgets in the most effective way? Or how do we go over performance data to figure out how can we improve as a team?’ They were able to do that themselves,” adds Tesluk.

Team leaders in this context, he says, must be able to provide the latitude for the team itself to decide how to best to do its work. “They need to be flexible on the means, but be very specific about what the end is.”

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