REVIEWING TEAMWORK ACTIVITIES

This article presents a model (based on the teamwork cycle of Mumma[1]) of the phases that teams go through when working on tasks or projects. It is a model that I have used very successfully in the reviewing of outdoor based structured "projects" on team-building courses. It has become one of my key elements in enabling teams to transfer learning from the training to the workplace (see article by same author [2]).

The Team-Work Cycle

The Team-Work Cycle can be divided into four phases: **Initiation** (when the task is analysed and defined), **Creation** (when alternative ways and methods to approach the task are generated), **Elaboration** (when the various ways of accomplishing the task are developed in detail), and **Completion** (when an approach is selected and the work is planned and carried out).

Phase One - Initiation

This phase is about the "what". In this phase it is important that the team identifies; (1) what the objectives of the task are, i.e. what is the team being asked to do? (2) What are the resources available to carry out the task - human, equipment etc. and, (3) what are the constraints - time limits, penalties, physical capabilities etc. Reviewing this phase centres around, the ability of the team members to analyse and share information enabling the team to arrive at a common understanding of the problem and a thorough identification of all constraints - rules, environment, resources and physical capabilities.

Phase Two - Creation

This phase is about "how". In this phase the team needs to concentrate on producing different ideas about how to carry out the previously defined task. Review topics include, the ability of team members to listen to and accept the ideas of others, the need to "capture" and build on ideas and knowing when to stop and move on to the next phase

Phase Three - Elaboration

This phase is about trying to make ideas work - the "fleshing out" of the various alternatives, in real terms. The elaboration of ideas from the previous phase includes the development of how to use people, time, money, and equipment to perform the task. Reviewing these phase centres around whose ideas are listened to? Whose ideas get blocked? The degree of listening and building on ideas etc.

Phase Four - Completion

The last phase occurs when the alternative approaches are considered and evaluated, one is chosen, and the task is carried out. Reviewing in this phase concentrates on the decision making process the team uses (consensus, voting, directive etc.) and the ability to turn plans into reality, including the ability to adapt plans where necessary.
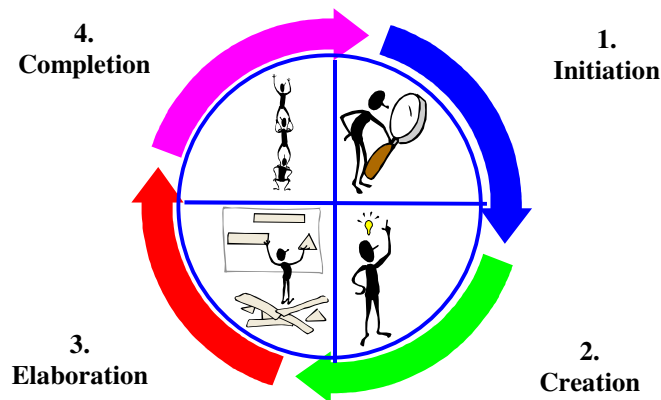
The Team-Work Cycle.

The key to effective teamwork is that a team working on a task or project should, ideally, start in phase one and then proceed sequentially from Phase One, through to Phase Four, moving from one phase to the next, together, with a common understanding.

Using the model

I use the model initially as a "theoretical input" (during the generalisation phase of Kolb - again see previous article by same author) after a fairly complex, time strict, orienteering based exercise, to help the team understand their way of functioning and identify strengths and development points. Although the model is pertinent to any exercise or activity where a group has to work together to solve a problem.

The written brief for this particular exercise requires the team to set their own objectives in terms of "points" gained and contains a list of locations with questions to be answered, rules (anyone leaving the room during the first ten minutes will be penalised 500 points, anyone re-entering the room without removing their shoes will be penalised 100 points, answer sheets given in after 60 minutes will be considered void, etc.), an answer sheet and a map.

Example 1 Team-building seminar for a French management team

Having handed out the brief and started the stopwatch, within five minutes one person had left the room to make some photocopies, someone else had already left for the nearest location, someone else was dissecting the map and the rest were trying to understand what had to be done. One person spotted the rules and quickly went out to call everyone back, forgetting, of course, to take off his shoes when coming back in. Needless to say, the team had incurred almost more penalties than points available in the exercise.

The review concentrated on the fact that rather proceeding sequentially from phase one to phase four, the team (or rather the individuals within the team), attacked all phases more or less in parallel. Some were in phase one trying to analyse the problem and understand what was being asked of them, some were generating various ways of doing what they "thought" the task was, one was arguing that there was no way he was going to run 10 kilometres in less than one hour and still others had moved directly to completion.

Identifying the different actions carried out during the exercise helped the team to realise that they had the necessary competencies within the team to carry out the exercise effectively (rather than finishing 300 points in the red), they simply needed to harness these competencies and use them at the appropriate point during the exercise.

Example 2 Team-building seminar for an Anglo-French management team from the fashion industry

Here the story was completely different. A thorough analysis of the exercise was carried out. The furthest locations (red herrings in the exercise) were eliminated, the page with the "rules" was quickly identified and its importance made aware to everyone and the need to establish a team objective was agreed. The team then moved in to the creativity and elaboration phases, only to "drift" finally into completion with about 25 minutes of the exercise remaining The final result was positive (in terms of points), but low in terms of the teams satisfaction with their performance.

The team's barriers to effective performance were a combination of "too much" creativity and the inability to make a decision. There were plenty of ideas as to how to carry out the task - operating in pairs, working as a whole group, using mobile phones, leaving someone at the hotel etc. - some of these were developed and the pros and cons discussed, unfortunately each time the team came close to making a decision someone had yet another idea that "had" to be discussed and considered. One team member eventually noticed the time "ticking by" and the only option left at that point was to concentrate on the closest locations and "under-achieve".

Whereas in the first example the team attacked all phases in parallel, in the second example the team got "stuck" in the creativity phase and were unable to move on due to "an excess of creativity (this behaviour reappeared in later exercises where it became obvious that a large number of team members actually enjoyed coming up with new ideas).

In both examples it was clear that certain individuals were tending to spend their time and energy on the aspects of the task they preferred, rather than the task itself. In cases such as this it is useful to integrate the work of Belbin[3] and his model of team roles to help individuals understand their preferred and rejected Team Roles and to help the team as whole to become more effective.

I use the model as a basis for most of the review sessions, initially as a trainer-led, fairly directive approach moving to a more team-led "auto-review" approach as the seminar progresses.

The teamwork cycle is simple and like all good "management theory" is based on good common sense. I have used it consistently to help teams understand their shortcomings and where to re-deploy their resources. Many of the management teams I have worked with have adopted it as one of their cornerstones of their "common frame of reference"

References

1   Mumma Frederick S. 1992 What makes your team tick?

2   Larcher Bob Putting Management team-building to work . Horizons 5, 1999.

3   Belbin R. M. Management teams - why they succeed or fail.