Overcoming the Common Hurdles of Self-Directed Work Teams

by Beth Yates
As teams have become more prevalent, various types of teams have emerged. One of these is a **self-directed work team** (SDWT)—a team made up of employees who bring their different skills and talents to work together, without typical managerial supervision, toward a common purpose or goal.

Self-directed work teams are enjoying a surge of popularity these days in a variety of corporate and industrial settings. SDWTs can be perfect for project-specific work, or for long-term production of some type of output, as in a plant or factory.

While SDWTs are all the rage, they encounter two stubborn obstacles to success: role confusion and conflict resolution.

### THE UPSIDE OF SELF-DIRECTED WORK TEAMS

With parameters in place, there are a lot of advantages to be had from the SDWT model. You never hear a SDWT member grumble, “My boss told me to.” Instead, there is shared responsibility for team outcomes. Each team practices active, autonomous self-management, with that sense of self-pride and desire to make good that ownership status entails. Team members have the closest line of sight to what they’re doing—and that makes for an engaged, empowered group that can self-correct if needed. SDWTs have particularly been embraced in manufacturing and other plant organizations, where they are proving themselves to be effective and innovative.

### SET UP FOR SUCCESS

In order for these teams to operate at peak form, organizations must lend support at the outset. Leaders need to share information so the team gets a clear understanding of what it’s doing within the larger organizational perspective. Management also needs to define boundaries—self-set goals must be calibrated within the context set by leadership. Management may also provide a meaningful mission statement to the team, and train members in the skills they’ll need to succeed.

### WHAT’S THE CATCH?

The most common obstacles I see to self-directed work team success arise in two areas: process confusion about roles, and decision-making, and conflict resolution. In this white paper, I’ll tackle both, and offer practical solutions that, in my experience, solve the issues.

### SOLVING THE OBSTACLE OF ROLE CONFUSION
Role confusion is like a computer virus: it can pop up when you least expect it…and you may not even notice it’s there until it’s already wreaked havoc on your team’s performance.

Confusion can arise early in a team’s cycle. For example, people simply may assume roles based on their functions and positions—then quickly begin to notice duplication of efforts. This looks like: “Wait a minute, Susie and I are both interviewing stakeholders for the marketing rollout - what gives?”

Misunderstandings may occur later, as team members are added to a mature team. This looks like: Jose and Felicia join the team and begin doing what makes sense to them, or what they like to do. This casual way of onboarding new team members misses the boat on role clarity. It may lead to churn and duplication of efforts; at other times, it can lead to important tasks being overlooked and deadlines missed.

Role confusion arises when team leaders think they’ve covered the bases and walked the team through their roles—but different people have interpreted the message in different ways. Cross-functional teams are especially prone to this problem. Another way confusion is created is when the content work to be done is clear, but the exact nature of the process work is fuzzier. In instances like these, team members may step back, assuming others are doing it. This creates a lack of accountability that leads to critical deliverables falling through the cracks.

The costs of role confusion are not just duplication of effort and lack of accountability. Let’s not overlook frustration, a decrease in trust among team members, and “cya” behaviors resulting from that frustration and lack of trust. Some teams even resort to using the team lead/manager to play one member off another—not a place you want your team to end up.

WHAT’S A TEAM LEADER TO DO?

I’d like to share a structured process I’ve used successfully to get clarification for all roles, responsibilities, and decision making responsibilities on a team. It can be used at any time in the team lifecycle. It has the benefit of being a process where people can work together to share in the responsibility for its success, and so, own the outcome. Here are the steps.

A. Get your team together, give members flip charts and markers, and ask them to work individually to:

1. List key responsibilities for their functional role on the team.
2. List key responsibilities for any process roles on the team.
3. List key decisions for which they are responsible for.

B. Have each person present out their flipchart to the others. Have others ask questions for clarification.
C. Identify any confusion or cross over.
D. Clarify roles and responsibilities that you know, and work to bring those that haven't been determined to resolution.
E. Document each member's roles, responsibilities, and decision making scope. This can be used as a reference for the group—and given to any new team members as they join. If a new role is needed later, you can craft the roles, responsibilities, and decision making scope, using the existing ones to clarify. I have seen this process help many teams get clear on roles.

While role confusion is a common challenge on self-directed teams, you’ll find this approach solves most difficulties that arise.

RESOLVING SDWT CONFLICTS

The second area where I've seen SDWTs really get tripped up is in the area of conflict resolution. You see, on other teams, if there's an impasse, or what seem to be insurmountable differences, the team can escalate the disagreement to the boss for a judgment. Self-directed teams, on the other hand, must work out conflict completely on their own.

DEFAULT RESPONSES TO CONFLICT

Most people have a default mode to conflict–often it's what we learned at home. There are five typical conflict response modes; each appropriate in some situations, and not at all suitable for others. Here they are, adapted from The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument*.

Avoidance
Withdrawing from or suppressing differences. It's appropriate when an issue is minor; when the disruption from conflict outweighs the benefits of resolution; when people need time to calm down and regain perspective.

Accommodation
Yielding or subordinating your own interests to those of the other party. Use accommodation when harmony and stability of relationships are especially important, perhaps more important than the results or goal accomplishments in the moment.

Compromise
Giving up something to create a mutually acceptable solution. This makes sense when
temporary agreement to complex issues is important, or you must obtain quick solutions under time pressure. It may be necessary to revisit the conflict when you have more time.

**Competition**
Going all out to win, often pursuing own interests at expense of others. Can be helpful when stimulating creativity for short-term learning or productivity.

**Collaboration**
Recognizing all interests and working toward mutual gain. Perfect when your objective is to learn; to include insights from people with different perspectives; to gain commitment through consensus.

As you can see, avoiding conflict and being competitive are perfectly fine responses to some situations. The point is not that we have to give up our default mode. The point is to become aware of our default mode, when it’s best used, and then, be flexible enough to respond in other ways. We need to be **conscious** about our choice of conflict response.

**HOW IT PLAYS OUT**

Let’s look at a typical SDWT conflict resolution scenario—at an automobile manufacturing plant, where an SDWT is working to agree on employee policy. It is trying to agree on the appropriate reaction when an employee sees someone on the line skipping agreed-upon quality processes. The team members agree that employees should correct the individual in the moment to ensure compliance.

But the next question splits them: Do we report the incident?

Most team members are all for reporting—in order to avoid safety issues and defects. But one team member reacts with competition. "I can't report it; what happens to my teammate? How will he view me in the future? As someone who impacted his work and livelihood."

Other team members dig in regarding reporting the issue. “Okay, I agree,” says the dissenting team member at last. She switches from competition to accommodation. The meeting moves on, but there is lingering doubt. No one really believes she is on board with the reporting policy. And nobody knows what will really happen if she spots someone
cutting corners.

This team will need to reframe the question of writing up reports and consider: How do we create a plant with a 100% defect-free environment? Until they do, this conflict is likely to simmer under the surface.

To be able to effectively step into conflict, and work to a real resolution, SDWT members need a variety of skills:

- The ability to surface interests vs. positions,
- The skill to inquire, and listen,
- The capacity to clearly share a perspective and make a case,
- The ability to consider other perspectives with openness, and
- The ability and willingness to change one’s mind.

CONCLUSION

As self-directed work teams continue to grow in prevalence, you may find yourself grappling with conflict resolution issues or the problem of role confusion. Try the strategies outlined here to solve these common problems, and you’ll realize the benefits of being self-directed, without the common hassles.

ABOUT BETH YATES

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