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# Using a Peer-Nominated Team to Drive Change and Improve Trust

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### Abstract

The article discusses the use of a peer-nominated team for driving change and improvement of trust in an organization. Topics include the concerns identified by the leadership of an organization during the survey of employees annually, the case study regarding the utilization of a peer nominated, cross-functional team within a multi-national healthcare company in Canada, and the involvement aspired by the client organization to start the change process.



### Keywords

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### Disciplines

Psychology

"While most efforts to drive change discuss the need for leaders to be the champions of change and the employee voice in making change, few change efforts involve shared leadership. This can be accomplished by involving a team with peer-nominated members to fully represent employees and provide them with a formal mechanism for having a representative voice."

# Using a Peer-Nominated Team to Drive Change and Improve Trust

## A Case Study[1]

By Timothy M. Franz and Paul M. Mastrangelo

Organizations use self-managing teams (Manz & Sims, 1993; Marks, Mathieu, & Zaccaro, 2001)—especially cross functional ones—as part of their efforts to guide change (e.g., Kotter, 2007), improve trust (e.g., Avolio, Jung, Murry, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996; Webber 2002), and improve performance (e.g., Campany, Dubinsky, Druskat, Mangino, & Flynn, 2007; Manz & Sims, 1993). These teams can improve results through: information sharing and dissemination (e.g., Mesmer-Magnus & DeChurch, 2009); identifying creative solutions (Gilson, Mathieu, Shalley, & Ruddy, 2005); problem solving (Kline & McGrath, 1998); reducing supervisory costs (Nygren & Levine, 1996); and promoting buy-in (Burke, Wilson, & Salas, 2005). Often organization leaders create "action teams" after conducting an employee survey to gather suggestions for improvement.

Despite the prevalence of team interventions for planned change, the process of how to create such a team is rarely considered. According to Webber (2002), the selection of team members is critical and often overlooked. Instead, action teams are typically formed by asking for volunteers or having leaders assign direct reports. They often exist within limited boundaries, and they frequently have specific deliverables that mark the end of the team's existence.

A more powerful intervention can be created by forming teams to leverage the psychological underpinnings of commitment and trust. Under ideal circumstances a team whose purpose is to drive change should form based on a public commitment (e.g., Katzev & Wang, 1994) by the organization; be based on the democratic process of peer nomination (e.g., Sullivan & Transue, 1999); represent those whom it helps (e.g., Owen & Dennis, 2001); and have an ongoing role (e.g., Sirkin, Keenan, & Jackson, 2005).

A peer-nominated team can drive change in part because employees select representatives where "intimacy, our voice, and the uniqueness of the human being is heard and valued" (Block, 2008, p. 36). The team will ultimately reflect the informal and formal networks. Respected, influential employees will be nominated, and the resulting team's voice can then directly represent employees' needs, concerns, questions, and suggestions. When joined by one or two committed leaders, the team succeeds by combining the authority to implement changes with the trust and confidence gained through a grass-roots effort (Webber, 2002).

Peer-nominated teams require different leadership (Nygren & Levine, 1996), because leaders must share responsibility while remaining accountable. They must relinquish control and instead serve as facilitators. These shared leadership behaviors increase effectiveness because they foster spirit, encourage interaction, help members to process conflict, encourage goal setting, and improve critical analysis. As a result, shared leadership yields improved trust and performance (Avolio,

*1. We presented this research at the 27th annual SIOP conference. We thank Mike Palanski and Kyle Brink for commenting and Tracey Ramsay for assistance.*

Jung, Murry, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996; Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007) likely through improvements in team potency, strengthened commitment, improvements in communication, enhanced knowledge, and increased interdependence (Bligh, Pearce, & Kohles, 2006). Finally, the peer-nominated team can also be a tool to develop others. Leadership development works in part through current leaders actively collaborating with potential leaders to learn leadership competencies (Olivares, 2008).

While most efforts to drive change discuss the need for leaders to be the champions of change and the employee voice in making change, few change efforts involve shared leadership. This can be accomplished by involving a team with peer-nominated members to fully represent employees and provide them with a formal mechanism for having a representative voice. This recognizes the informal power of employees to influence peers regardless of formal rank. Cowley (2007) found that to make change succeed, a leader must form coalitions, influence the informal system, and hold people accountable, all processes that we used in the case study below. To show the success of the case study intervention, we provide evidence from year-to-year comparisons of survey data.

## Organization Background

This case study examines the use of a peer-nominated, cross-functional team within the Canadian division of a multi-national healthcare company, headquartered in the United States. At the time of the start of the intervention, the organization had approximately 100 employees, about half of whom were in the field. The organization was facing market pressure and employee survey scores identified a potential lack of trust in leadership.

Our work was grounded on principles dictated by Kotter (2007) and Rothwell, and Sullivan (2005). The organization had recently encountered three strong external forces. First, they had propriety pharmaceutical products that were selling in an increasingly competitive market. Second, they faced significant market declines for the primary product.[2] Finally, the division had undergone changes in top management.

## Presenting Problem

The organization's leadership formally identified concerns during its annual employee survey. Specifically, the results yielded lower scores than the previous year as well as lower scores than other divisions for key metrics such as satisfaction, innovation, and opportunity for advancement. Given the negative results showing decreases in scores across 21 of 22 survey categories versus the prior year, senior leaders launched a feedback and diagnostic process to understand the complexity of the issues. They established six principles for this process:

1. Determine a consistent approach across the organization.
2. Create a transparent and safe environment.
3. Identify an inclusive process to facilitate participation.
4. Set priorities owned by senior leaders.
5. Create flexibility in pace and timelines to address issues.
6. Provide a formal mechanism to track progress.

Based on these principles, the leaders identified a set of managers to better process survey results. The managers chose to utilize an outside consultant to develop and implement a transparent and trustworthy diagnosis of the issues and then engage employees in a change mandate for better future performance. The organization engaged us, both affiliated with the survey organization, as consultants.

We investigated the problem further by conducting approximately 30 hours of listening time, including 8 focus groups and 11 individual interviews with 49 employees located in the office and in the field. An analysis of these demonstrated concerns with trust in leadership, the value that the organization placed in people, and the effectiveness and sustainability of the organization to innovate. These results were shared with leaders who decided to focus on improving trust, valuing people, improving communication, and organizational sustainability.

## Creating Readiness for Change

We utilized a large-scale intervention during a four-hour period at the national sales meeting. This was based on the first stages of a process called Work-out (Bunker & Alban, 2006) and adapted to fit the organization's time frame and meeting goals. We had two goals: to inform the organization about the results of the interviews and focus groups and to start it on the path to change.

At the meeting, the organization was divided into small groups, and each focused on one of the major issues identified from the interviews and focus groups. The small groups named problem areas, and then divided them into groups of issues that could be solved immediately versus issues that would take time to solve. To gain some small wins, the organization's General Manager, working with other senior leaders, solved several of these minor issues immediately by setting goals, redirecting staff priorities, and/or setting budget priorities.

## Creating a Peer-Nominated Team to Guide Change

The client organization wanted our involvement to start the change process but also wanted to move from our leading the change to the organization's own members leading it. Thus we quickly established the idea of a cross-functional team. This required us to form the team, work with it to set goals, train it about making change, work with it on initial changes, and support it as necessary as it moved forward.

At the national sales meeting, we collected peer nominations of organizational members who each employee thought would best serve on the cross-functional team. The nominations were of people who

*2. Because of economic and market changes, the division in this case study merged with another division. The new merged organization has embraced many of the processes described in this paper.*

Table 1. *Year-to-year comparison of the three survey areas of most significant improvement in employee opinions about organizational functioning.*

| Company Innovation | | Valuing People | | Communication | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Area of Measurement** | **%** | **Area of Measurement** | **%** | **Area of Measurement** | **%** |
| Research | +22 | Participation rate | +32 | Clear goals and objectives | +15 |
| Launch new products and services | +14 | Satisfaction with involvement in decisions | +14 | Having a clear sense of direction | +14 |
| Commitment to innovation | +11 | Valuing employee opinions | +12 | Satisfaction with information from management | +13 |
| Encouraging innovation | +10 | Understands customer needs | +15 | | |
| Experiments with innovation | +10 | Commitment to customer satisfaction | +13 | | |
| | | Responsible towards its customers | +10 | | |

*Note: % indicates year-to-year improvement.*

could represent their voice to and influence the senior leaders and would be willing to openly share opinions with senior leaders even on issues that might be sensitive, contentious, or difficult. Most employees had input about who might serve.

After collecting the nominations, we organized the list, including the number of times each was nominated, the division or sub-specialty within the organization, geographic location, and people management status. The final list of potential team members, representing specialty and geography, was given to senior leaders, who then worked with potential members and managers to verify that each nominee had the time and willingness to serve. One nominee declined because of workload and was replaced by the next on the list; all other nominees committed to participating.

### Team Training

The peer-nominated team met for a two-day retreat. The nine sections of the training were based on the work of Boyd (2007), Stagl and Salas (2008), and Dickens and Watkins (1999). The nine sections were:

1. Develop the team to allow members to get to know one another and gain some initial trust.
2. Define the team's goals, responsibilities, and mission.
3. Discuss disclosure and confidentiality to create a safe environment.
4. Clarify the role of the two senior leaders who were part of the team, including how they would act as fully functioning team members, advocate to senior leadership, and act as a sounding board for determining whether ideas might face budgetary or legal constraints.
5. Learn Organization Development basics to help the team define its role.
6. Discuss how to select immediate actions.

7–9. Learn how to perform action planning.

Given the scope of the changes, all team members committed to participating for two years.

### Team Actions Following Training

After the two-day meeting, the team identified three corporate priorities that transcended all functional areas. The team then established a champion (who was not necessarily a senior leader or member), a timeline, and relevant metrics to determine success on those priorities. The team was accountable for:

» Setting priorities and determining metrics for the action plans.
» Leading and participating on action planning sub-teams.
» Developing and implementing communication plans.
» Championing change platforms.
» Working as communication conduits including providing monthly updates and reaching out to the organization and their representative peer groups to communicate information and seek feedback.

### Leadership Roles and Responsibility

Leadership had to differ from typical leadership behaviors. The division's General Manager, a member of the team, needed to: balance her involvement as General Manager while allowing the team to make its own decisions; create transparency while maintaining appropriate scope and provide a forum for immediate decision making; remain accountable for the organization while verifying that the team was accountable for its actions; and communicate that all employees, especially those on the team, needed to be part of the solution.

### Findings: Organizational Outcomes from the Team from the Annual Employee Survey

Despite declines in normative comparisons for the employee survey, the company saw improvements of 6% or more on dimensions directly related to company innovation, communication, customer orientation, goals and objectives, and satisfaction with management, all areas of focus of the intervention (see *Table 1*). For example, the percentage of employees who agreed that the company had clear goals increased by 15% as did the percentage of employees who agreed that the company understood its customers. Twenty percent of the 79 survey items improved by 10% or more. However, some items continued to decline from the previous year—most notably, trust in one another (–18%) and accountability for upholding values (–17%). Overall, topics most related to the intervention accounted for most of the survey score increases while topics unrelated to the intervention (e.g., supervision, job demands, and ethical conduct) showed declines (see *Figure 1*).

### Findings: Other Organizational Metrics

The organization collected additional metrics to examine team success. For example, the organization collected information regarding goal and objective setting to assess performance management. Average scores on the ratings of management performance increased by an additional 7% during the year. In addition, anecdotal evidence from senior leaders revealed that several key employees who left the organization were now asking about returning to open positions.

One of the goals of using the peer-nominated team was to change culture so that the transformed organization valued people more. First, the organization developed a culture where it was acceptable to "say it like it is" without repercussion. Second, the organization developed a culture of transparency and trust exemplified by the fact that employees chose the peer-nominated team to lead the diagnosis and action planning process during the next year. Third, the organization developed a culture of communication and information dissemination by championing a formal two-way communication mechanism through the team. Finally, the organization developed a culture of hearing diverse perspectives across domains thus minimizing the impact of what was previously a structure with silos.

In addition to information about the team's positive impact, the employee survey also provided the organization with some information about what actions remained for the upcoming year. All of the key action-plan items were also the responsibility of the peer-nominated team (see *Table 2*). This added responsibility is another possible measure of the team's success.

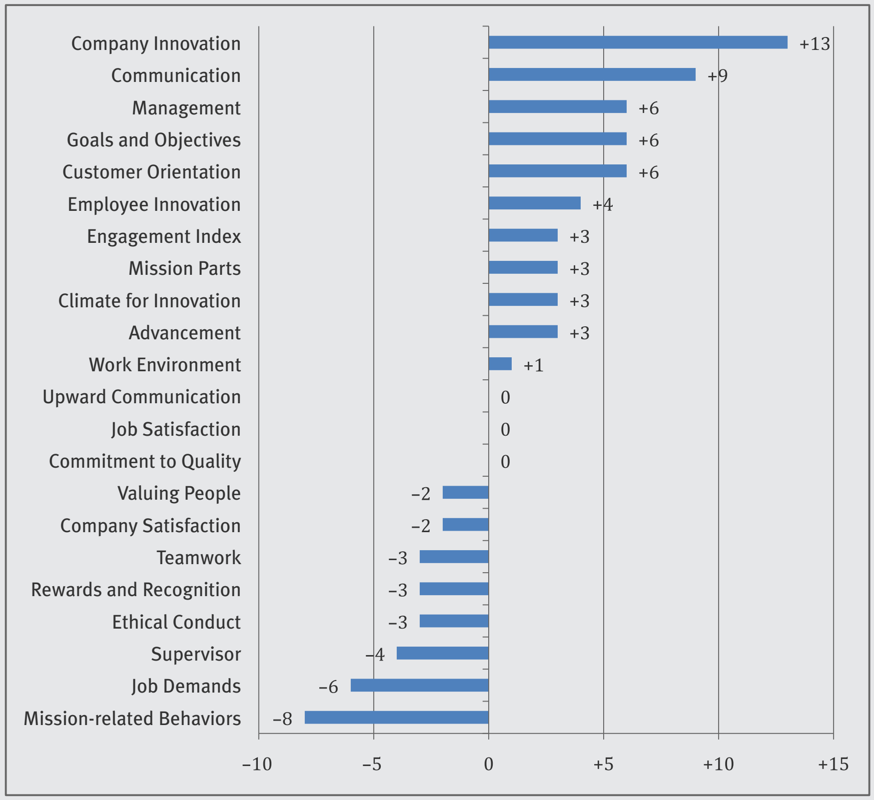


*Figure 1*. Year to year comparison showing areas of improvement and decline in employee opinions.

Table 2. *Peer-nominated Team Items for Action Planning*

| |
|---|
| » Intervention with one department that had considerably lower responses on the follow-up survey than the company average. After intervention, 6 of 9 survey categories increased in favorable scores versus the prior year; employee innovation increased by +34%; valuing people by +27%, and the engagement index increased by +17%. |
| » Led the next employee survey feedback sessions because of the confidence and trust in the team gained. |
| » Goals to keep the organization on a similar path as many of the previous action plans bridged a 2-year timeframe. |

### Findings: Organizational Learning

This intervention was, in part, based on action learning principles (Marquardt, 1999) where an organization must be able to learn as it progresses through its actions. In a feedback session, team members identified five major areas of learning:

- » Any change-management plan needs to allow for short, medium, and long-term goals.
- » Every team member must have his or her manager's support to participate because of the additional workload and this must be documented and recognized in employee's reviews.
- » The team must be able to engage employees across differences in geography, hierarchy, and function.

Table 3. *Reflections from the General Manager*

***What did you learn from the process?***

1. Confront the brutal facts to see clearly what steps must be taken—seek to understand through fostering an environment of courageous conversations—ask the tough questions and say it like it is, no repercussions—discussions revolve around facts; not judgments.
2. Consider the importance of taking accountability when things go poorly.
3. Team members need to be on board.
4. Remember to work at a grassroots level.
5. People want to be valued, successful, and be able to do the right thing.
6. Have a clear vision of the future.
7. Listen, learn, and then get out of the way.
8. Cultural change is more effectively driven through engaging every employee.
9. A high performance team that can reach throughout the organization can accelerate this thinking/positive behavior.
10. Trust is fundamental to success. Create transparent processes and then trust in your people.
11. Implementation is everything. Creating a good vision and strategy are only the starting place.
12. You can never communicate enough.

***How did this affect the company?***

1. It rebuilt trust in people, in organization process, and in performance.
2. It provided an enduring feedback mechanism.
3. It increased accountability.
4. It increased tolerance and moved the organization from "us" and "them" to "we."

***How can other leaders learn from this?***

1. Senior leaders need to speak from a place of truth and take accountability for poor results.
2. A leader's style will have to flexibly respond to the needs of employees and customers.
3. Know your company's influence map. Formal and informal leaders are important to driving a change platform. Peer nomination brings clarity to understanding this network.
4. Once you create a high performance team, listen, learn, support, and coach but most importantly get out of the way!
5. Engagement through shared accountability can accelerate positive change.

» Survey analysis and action planning should be transitioned to a peer-nominated team to lead.
» The focus for year two remained almost constant instead of taking on new initiatives because of the roll out of initiatives that had been developed over the first year.

Finally, the General Manager reflected about how a leader may use a peer-nominated team (see *Table 3*). Most importantly, she indicated that avoiding problems will only make a situation worse. Instead, she recommended facing those problems to overcome them; this process should allow some conflict or it becomes a pressure cooker (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001). She also recommended carefully assessing the underlying problems (not just the surface ones) and following up each action to measure the impact of change efforts. Finally, she recommended listening to employees—especially those on the peer-nominated team—to learn what they need and to gain their trust.

## Conclusions and Implications: The Impact of a Peer-Nominated Team on Organizational Change

Culture change interventions often do not measure up to expectations. One reason is that supervisors and leaders resist cross-functional teams with considerable employee involvement. This is because they may perceive that employees may face concerns about job security, personal development, and extra work (Klein, 1984). According to Klein, training, involvement, responsibility, and authority help to diminish these concerns. The peer-nominated, cross-functional team used in this intervention was able to have a voice and succeed because the employees themselves selected team membership and members were trained. Members could work at grassroots level to keep organizational stakeholders involved. According to Heifetz and Laurie (2001), "solutions to adaptive challenges reside not in the executive suite but in the collective intelligence of employees at all levels, who need to use one another as resources, often across boundaries, and learn their way" (p. 132).

Another reason that change efforts fail (e.g., Kotter, 1999) is because organizations have no strong guiding coalition. Sharing leadership with members—the case with a peer-nominated team—can help organizations to create this guiding coalition. Cowley (2007) demonstrated that to make change succeed a leader must form coalitions, communicate well, influence the informal system, and hold all people within the organization (as well as those who are on the guiding team) accountable.

There are at least five reasons that may explain why the peer-nominated team was successful (see Kotter, 1999):

1. It was representative of the organization.
2. It represented both formal and informal sources of power; respected and influential employees were nominated.
3. The team created a method for communicating information up and down. The team could talk with employees in

formal or informal settings and learn about needs and issues while discussing organizational goals that were being carried out.
4. The team was self-directed, fully responsible for carrying out its recommended actions. This provided a level of commitment that often cannot be accomplished by a leader.
5. The team consisted of two leaders who were committed to its mission. Thus, the team had the trust and confidence of a grassroots effort combined with the authority to implement change.

This team was only used within one division within a multi-national pharmaceutical, but it could have a positive impact in other organizations. For example, when organizations are developing key leadership competency areas (Catteeuw, Flynn, & Vonderhurst, 2007), this type of peer-nominated team can help to develop leaders because "the voices from below are usually not as articulate as one would wish" (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001, p. 137). Team members had high formal and informal power and were able to see how the leaders acted, model those behaviors, and then practice them when they worked with their constituents (Olivares, 2008).

Organizational leaders may find this peer-nominated, cross-functional team to be a useful tool for improving information sharing and dissemination, identifying a larger variety of creative solutions to problem solving, and/or creating a mechanism for promoting employee buy-in for proposed organizational changes. It is counterintuitive because, to some extent, leaders are accustomed to being the decision makers. However, it is clear that shared leadership can lead to better performance (Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007). In addition, a leader who puts aside self-interests and focuses on the interests of the team and organization is likely to improve trust (DeCremer & vanKnippenberg, 2005).

Thus, a challenge that leaders might face with this peer-nomination process is to learn to abdicate some of what they see as leadership to successfully lead change. Unfortunately, not all leaders are ready and willing to share. In addition, not all followers are willing and able to lead. Another challenge is that leaders are ultimately responsible for team outcomes and may have to exercise veto power. Some examples are when resources are scarce, recommendations clash with broader organizational goals, or (as in the case of pharmaceutical companies) there are governmental mandates. This veto power must be used with care in order to avoid undermining the power of shared leadership that results from a peer-nominated team.

There are of course limitations to our case study, the primary of which is causality: We cannot say the peer-nominated team was the cause of the improvement. Future research should further investigate this. This team, however, certainly had the authority and influence to help to lead change.

According to Duck (1993), "a transition management team is not a new layer of bureaucracy or a job for fading leaders" (p 116) but a process-oriented team designed to drive change. It requires commitment from and sustained effort of its members. Highly developed teams can lead to synergy—performance gains beyond what can be expected of the team (Larson, 2010)—as long as there are support systems in place (Avolio, et al., 1996). A peer-nominated, cross-functional change team is one way to transform a company into a community where organizational members have a sense of purpose and dedicate their resources to tasks and organizational goals (Mirvis, 2008).

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