

Organizations benefit from fluid team dynamics, less rigid authority lines

April 1 2013, by Victoria Fryer

Organizations can benefit by making more use of team members' skills and enhancing creativity, rather than adhering to more rigid authority lines and hierarchies, according to a paper on team dynamics co-authored by Stephen Humphrey, associate professor of management at the Penn State Smeal College of Business.

Allowing expression of [power](#) among teams to change based on a particular situation or task is more effective in our knowledge economy, the researchers say.

To generate impactful new products, services and ideas in today's [business world](#), organizations need to make efficient use of the diverse knowledge and skill sets held by employees.

Their study, "The Riddle of Heterarchy: Power Transitions in Cross-Functional Teams," proposes a shift away from traditional [hierarchies](#) toward the more flexible power heterarchy. The researchers define power heterarchy as "a relational system in which the relative power among team members shifts over time due to the resources of specific team members becoming more relevant because of changes in the situation or task."

Flexible power structures are critical for team performance, researchers say. To generate impactful new products, services and ideas in today's business world, organizations need to make [efficient use](#) of the diverse knowledge and skill sets held by employees. Team members should be

encouraged to step up and express power based on their possession of appropriate knowledge skills and abilities to respond to the task's situational needs.

The researchers also assert that a flexible power structure ultimately leads to enhanced creativity: "Creativity is enhanced by horizontal power transitions in the functioning of teams where power is expressed dynamically by members whose particular knowledge skills and abilities are valuable to the situational needs of the task at hand," they write.

To facilitate power heterarchy in their own organizations, managers should enable shifts in team power expressions based on identified resource needs for a given situation.

Humphrey and his colleagues lay out several ways for better creating and managing teams, arguing that following these guidelines will increase team creativity and innovation:

- Leverage the team members' diversity by increasing the visibility of what everyone brings to the team.
- Managers should not be afraid to add several people with power to a team – these teams can operate more effectively than a team with a single "star."
- Select teams, in part, based upon the leadership potential of members – teams composed of multiple members with an inherent tendency to lead will be more fluid in their power transitions.
- Form teams with members who have diverse skill sets and resource access, allowing internal power expressions to shift as necessary.
- Enable fluid team membership, allowing team member entrance and exit as necessary to best suit a situation.

"Managers must create a team culture where shifts in power expression are not only free to occur as situational demands change, but also that these shifts in power expression will be seen by the team as legitimate," write the researchers. In doing so, they improve their team's creative ability to respond to problems and enhance trust among team members that supports a seamless transition of power expression.

Humphrey co-authored the paper, to be published in a forthcoming from the *Academy of Management Journal*.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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