

Leslie Braksick: Teams, Task Forces and Committees

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Companies often launch special project teams, task forces and committees to get important work done. Often it makes great sense: charter a small group with a distinct purpose, let them work quickly, and get their findings/recommendations.

These special teams offer tremendous advantages. They give executives the chance to observe different people's performance. Special groups can bypass the bureaucracy and avoid organizational churn that mainstream efforts can stir up. There are all kinds of benefits for using special teams.

However, lurking behind the launch of special project teams may be an unacknowledged dissatisfaction with those accountable for that work. Rarely are there honest conversations with them about why the project team is being launched instead of asking them to either perform or oversee the work. Rarely are they given such caring feedback, which might help them to actually get better.

Let's consider a few real-life examples:

A team is formed to evaluate a potential joint venture in China. (The head of strategy and business development group were bypassed for this important work.)

A small group is assigned to evaluate the organization's culture change needs. (The CEO lacked confidence in the human resources organization but that feedback was never shared directly with HR. It was, however, shared obliquely with others when they asked why HR was not leading this effort.)

A team is pulled together to determine if a new product line, targeting a growing demographic, makes sense. (Corporate's new product development group and head of innovation were both bypassed when this project was launched. And the special team was told to keep its work confidential until they were told otherwise.)

You have to stop and ask: was a special project team *really* necessary in each of these situations? Or did the executives opt for special teams because they lacked confidence that

those normally responsible could perform the quality of work they were seeking? And if they lacked such confidence, did they give the individuals who hold those jobs the respect of telling them, which would have been a step toward helping them get better?

I would say this: *If*, in fact, the special project teams are a workaround, then the first one who needs to change behaviors is the executive in charge. Delaying the dealing with a performance issue or competency gap only perpetuates mediocrity in the organization, and weakens the leader's effectiveness. Imagine if the whole organization did that same thing. Another issue to watch for is how implementation of project team recommendations are handled. Because the team was structured from the outset to work in parallel to the core organization, there is no "permanent home" or ownership for what is recommended, let alone what is implemented. This is a serious problem, because the game is won or lost on execution, not on the greatness of the ideas.

So what should your takeaways be? First, sometimes using special project teams is exactly the right thing to do. However, before you launch a special project team, task force, or committee, ask yourself: are *you* working around a capability or performance gap in your own organization? If so, have you dealt with the people/performance concerns directly — in a caring, yet clear and constructive way?

And second, if you want to be a respected leader whom others look up to, and if you want others to freely discuss the "real issues" and to address performance issues, you need to be the first in line to model the right behavior. As a leader, people are watching you for cues all of the time. Be the leader you want and expect others to be.

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