Chapter III
Decision-Making as a Facilitator of High-Achievement in Non-Hierarchical Technical Environments

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a look at the decision-making methods used by real-life, collegial, high-achieving, technical teams and organizations. One may argue that the type of technical team that is being considered is not critical. When a group of individuals come together to examine and solve a tough technical challenge the synergy created in reaching a conclusion is usually quite astounding. As the author will explore in this chapter, many researchers have come to the conclusion that the manner in which those teams make decisions is one factor that affects the achievement level of the team. It is then reasonable to suggest that an organization's achievement level is related to the decision-making method of its technical teams. This chapter contains a review of the published literature on team decision-making. In keeping with the practical-level theme of this book, also discussed are the results of a unique study of 31, intact, real-life, technical teams. The teams operated in open, unbounded environments. The resulting theory that emerged from the data was that a collegial, technical, team's selection of the majority-rule method may be an indicator that the team will reach a high-achievement level. The preceding is important because contemporary work organizations may not be obtaining the maximal benefits from their work teams if they attempt to "force" teams to implement other types of decision-making methods.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter will be to provide an insight into, and description of, the decision-making method of flat-structured (i.e., collegial), technical organizations. This chapter will provide a basis for exploring how a technical organization's structure and decision-making method are related to its level of achievement. In this chapter, we examine an organization via its teams that are operating in open and unbounded environments. Since collegial, or ad hoc, or self-managed, teams (and their surrounding organizations) may be more competitive when compared to large hierarchical enterprises, understanding how these micro-enterprises reach their levels of achievement should be of interest to those who are affiliated with cross-disciplinary research.

The underlying premise for this chapter is that a team's decision-making process affects the team's level of achievement. The preceding is a reasonable assumption, in light of the research that has been done in this area (e.g., Russo & Schoemaker, 1990; Watson et al., 1991; Yeaple, 1992; Safoutin & Thurston, 1993; Barrick et al., 1998; Katzenbach & Smith, 1999).

The word **team** will be used frequently in this chapter. However, do not let that term mislead you. The concepts and principles apply to larger **organizations**. That is especially true if one considers that most technology-based organizations are a collection of technical teams. Therefore, we will be loose with the terms teams and organizations; often using them interchangeably. It should be readily apparent when one moniker is not a suitable substitute for the other. For example, if a reference is made to research that was done using ten teams, then this is not the same thing as saying that the research was done using ten organizations; all of the teams could have been from a single organization.

The objectives of this chapter are to provide:

- Insight into how flat-structured high-achieving technical organizations view decision-making.
- Insight into how high-achieving technical organizations select and implement their decision method.
- Identifiers of when a technical organization may be headed towards high-achievement levels.
- Strengths and weaknesses of various decision methods as they apply to flat-structured technical organizations.

BACKGROUND

At this point, it is probably helpful to define what is meant by a decision-making method, and for that matter, a team. The decision-making methods (advocacy, autocratic, consensus, inquiry, and majority-rule) discussed in this chapter, and defined below, were selected because they are frequently used by teams, and they are frequently studied by researchers that do team research.

In devil's **advocacy**, a team member champions a less accepted view or alternative for the sake of argument; helping to ensure that all alternatives are equally discussed. Devil's advocacy often prevents a team from discarding, or overlooking, excellent ideas.

An **autocratic** decision-making method is one where an individual, or possibly a small group of individuals, is the team's decision-maker. The decision-maker may or may not seek advice and recommendations from other team members.

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