


T-Shaped Managers



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Harvard Business Review (HBR) reported a need for a new type of manager. T-shaped managers have a deep, (the vertical part of the “T”) knowledge in their own expertise and a broad, (the horizontal part of the “T”) knowledge of general business issues and other departments and disciplines. T-shaped managers are creative, innovative and can provide a new way of looking at old problems.

Studies of T-shaped management techniques originate from the knowledge management school of thought; an asset that is often underutilised in organisations as they are unsure of how to manage their ‘knowledge economy’. Individual expertise, knowledge, skills and insights, are often scattered across the organisation. Knowledge management systems are a great tool for capturing explicit knowledge such as what measures to consider when assessing supplier performance. However implicit knowledge, such as knowing different personalities and experience of dealing with them, is much harder to capture.

Cross-functional teams have dealt with these issues to a certain degree, but they are often project-based and disband after a period of time. Networking groups can also engender a philosophy of knowledge sharing, but often they are sharing knowledge for knowledge sake, or as a BP executive put it in the HBR case study, creating “learning loops”. For T-shaped management to work it must be a structured approach with clear goals and be results-orientated.

How have other people achieved this?

When BP first adopted a T-Shaped management approach to knowledge management they developed an internal “yellow pages”, a directory of who knows what and where they sat in the business. Technology has since developed and social networking sites allow employees to post a profile which includes information on their knowledge, skills, experience etc. A simple search engine could pull together the most effective working party, steering group or committee at the click of a mouse.

Siemens have successfully saved millions (USD) through cross-functional working. “Three years ago, the large German industrial company launched a training program that brings high potential managers from different divisions together in small teams to solve a problem facing one of the business units. So far, more than 100 teams have been formed. Team members work together for about a year, which includes attending several week-long meetings at an off-site corporate campus. They then make recommendations to the business unit manager involved, who serves as the team coach during the project.

Through the program, team members develop their business skills; build informal relationships across business units, and save the company money - more than \$10 million so far- by solving real business problems.”¹

Benefits

The benefits of this style of knowledge management are not limited to bottom-line returns. This format is suitable for:

- Projects, including supporting major bids, business process re-engineering, system implementation;
- New product or market development or new business opportunities through cross-pollination of knowledge and idea;

¹ *Introducing T-Shaped Managers Harvard Business Review*

- Managing merger and acquisition transitions;
- Supplier development programmes;
- Increased efficiencies through sharing examples of excellent practices;
- better informed and higher quality decision making through peer advice;
- Encouraging a collaborative culture and breaking down silos and barriers.

Summary

The philosophy behind the implementation of T-shaped management at BP was “collaborate, relate, give and receive”. Collaboration builds relationships: collaborate with peer groups, relate people with problems and people with answers, give and receive advises.”

The T-Shaped manager is ideal for a profession such as Procurement where their reach is cross divisional/departmental. T-Shaped managers not only act as experts advising the business (give) but they can also learn more about their products, services and markets from individuals in the business units (receive). This can be further enriched by collaborating with suppliers and customers (internal and external), by relating to them, T-shaped procurement professionals can build a better understanding of their needs and therefore deliver true value throughout the supply chain.

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