

Exploring Leader Positioning in Self-Managed Team (SMT)

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Abstract

This research focuses on the positioning of leaders in the occurrences of conflicts in teams. Organisations utilise teams to encourage members with various knowledge resources to produce novel ideas that result in creative output. A team consists of a group of employees, with different expertise, working together toward a common goal. Self-Managed Team (SMT) is the focus for this study, which is a type of team that requires a different approach towards its structure, processes and leadership. This type of team is also known as a “bossless team” which describes the structure of a team that has no leader. The SMT consists of interdependent individuals who have accepted responsibility for a group task and share this responsibility by monitoring and controlling the contributions of its members. Team members of SMT make decisions by themselves, thus reducing one of the important roles of a leader. SMT members have a variety of abilities which are a result of utilising a combination of experts from different areas. They are given certain discretion regarding decision making which involves the decisions on the method of conducting and planning their tasks as well as the division of tasks. These characteristics empower the group where the team members’ involvement is important and they are given the autonomy to control any variations from the objectives, which then contributes towards increasing their productivity, working satisfaction and commitment towards their team. Leading a team which manages itself is a challenge as increased autonomy and control is given to the team which eliminates the existence of a leader. Although it seems that raising the issue of leadership in a self-managing team is contradictory, these teams usually have some form of external supervision known as ‘external leader’ who is positioned outside the team. The external leader carries a more complex role than traditional team leadership. The team members share responsibilities on problem solving and decision making whereas the external leader is only in charge of issues such as financial, technical or human resources. As teams are always working in a dynamic and complex environment, this increases the needs of team members to coordinate their actions specifically in improving their work performance towards achieving the team’s objective. The team members also need to be proactive in predicting any changes in terms of the work environment and their assigned tasks; they also need to respond to these changes. Even in a self-managing team, there exists an external leader who holds the responsibility of supporting the team to ensure the team’s success. Hence, it is worth being able to understand how leadership and team processes are coordinated. During work process, team members will interact with people within and outside the team. As the interaction process involves different parties, conflict is inevitable as people might have different ideas and opinions. Therefore, it is important to study

the role of leaders during conflict in SMTs and how conflict is managed within these teams especially when there is no formal leader within the team. In achieving the objective, the study adopted qualitative approach which involved face-to-face interviews with team members from two project-based organizations in Malaysia. Data collected from the interviews were analyzed using content analysis to identify the emerging patterns and themes related to conflict management approaches which help explain the positioning of leaders during conflict in SMTs. It was evident that different leadership styles and positioning emerged as the SMT faced with different types of conflict throughout their project duration. Leadership positioning becomes vital in SMT as they transform into being leader-dependent due to several factors such as reputation, deadline and funding.