

STRUCTURAL DESIGN GUIDELINES

Wisdom from Herb Stokes

A. Guidelines For Locating Work Group Boundaries

The development of high performing, self-directing work teams will be facilitated if the following guidelines are observed in locating work group boundaries.

1. The group boundaries need to coincide with breakpoints in the transformation process where group performance can be measured, and feedback provided for self-regulation. This normally provides them with a “whole task” - i.e., one where they are producing an identifiable product, service or other outcome.
2. The boundaries should be located in such a way that the productive purpose will be clear and the group can set its own performance objectives and obtain the feedback they need to determine how well they are achieving their purpose and objectives.
3. The product, outcome or service produced by the group should be one that is meaningful – one it can identify with and feel good about, and one that others will view as significant and important.
4. The members should have enough autonomy to coordinate and regulate their activities and interactions to achieve the desired goals of the group, rather than having to depend on someone who is not a member of the group.
5. The group should have ready access to the information that they require to detect and control the variances that could have effect on their performance. Members of group should have access to all the information they need to solve problems and to assess its performance (feedback).
6. The tasks that fall within the groups boundary should be of such a nature that they require the members to collaborate, cooperate and help one another at least some of the time.
7. In order to provide opportunities to learn and develop new skills, a work group's task should require a range of skills, but the variety should not be so wide that the members not possessing a specific skill cannot understand its requirements.
8. The boundaries should be located at points where the group could detect and control most of the variables that could have a negative effect on their performance.
9. The amount of power, influence, status, prestige, etc. associated with the work assigned each group should be roughly the same as that of all other work groups within the same organizational unit.
10. Insofar as possible, each work group should have clear-cut territorial boundaries.

11. Insofar as possible, the members of the work group should work the same hours, or if this is not feasible, there should be the opportunity to overlap for periods of time for face-to-face information exchange, problem-solving, and decision-making activities.
12. The number of people required to perform the work should be small enough that the members can engage in effective and efficient problem solving and decision-making activities related to the work—usually no more than 12-18 members.

B. Guidelines For Organizing Small Units Into Larger Work Units

Coordination costs and intergroup conflict can be minimized by observing the following guidelines:

1. Where the work of groups is "reciprocally interdependent" (where some portion of the output of one group becomes the input for another group, a portion of whose output in turn becomes input to the first group), link the groups as closely as possible --both geographically and authority-wise. Provide for as much face-to-face interaction and feedback as possible.
2. When groups are "sequentially interdependent" (where the output of one becomes the input of another), provide some sort of a buffer between the groups that will provide each group with a reasonable degree of freedom from control by the other. Joint planning, scheduling, and performance activities will facilitate coordination.
3. "Boundary-spanning" teams can be created to handle coordinating and integrating activities. These are "part-time" work units made up of members of both groups. They can be used to minimize dependence on hierarchy for such activities.
4. Where significant and unpredictable variances in material or information jointly affect two or more groups, link those groups as closely as possible.
5. Linking groups together who have similar purposes, clientele, products, services, geographic areas, or skills will facilitate coordination and integration.
6. The coordination and management of larger units is easier if the size, responsibility and prestige of each group within the unit are approximately equal. This condition helps equalize power, which in turn makes it easier for the groups to handle many of their own coordination requirements.
7. Support groups should operate at the same "hierarchical" level as the operating groups they support. If they are at higher or lower levels, they will tend to act as "controllers" or "controlled" of the units they serve.

8. Where work group boundaries have located on the basis of time, but their task interdependencies cut across the time boundaries, their performance should be measured on a time frame long enough to prevent any performance competition from developing between the groups.
9. Avoid adding a level of hierarchy to coordinate intergroup activities where the work groups could do it themselves. The addition of unnecessary levels will usually result in additional costs that will normally outweigh any increase in operational efficiency.
10. Where one group's performance is heavily dependent on another's, the group member's awareness and appreciation of this fact can be increased by having members move from one group to the other at some frequency.