

 CASES FROM THE FIELD

Collaborative Decision Making and Shared Responsibility

By Heidi Nicholas and Tim Dorsey

Collaborative decision-making and shared responsibility across departments can be messy and time consuming. However, working collaboratively in a well-constructed cross-functional team (CFT) can create a culture of self-responsibility and accountability and improve institutional practices. The following paper will describe a successful model for forming and assigning roles in a cross-functional team. In addition, a case study illustrates the practical application of the described model. The case study examines completion teams formed at Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C) in Cleveland, Ohio.

Cross-Functional Teams are a Necessity

As the global pandemic passes, the need for cross-functional teams (CFTs) continues to be critical to student success in the virtual environment. Students went from having access to enrollment services, tutoring, learning centers, libraries, and faculty office hours to a computer screen. Student life was completely flipped upside-down. Students were frantic; some were desperate to find anyone to assist them in navigating online services and classrooms. This environment was new to everyone—including staff and administrators directly serving students. Teams had to adapt quickly to meet the needs of students.

An effective way to adapt quickly is to work together through cross-functional teams that include the voices

from all necessary departments. This approach ensures that institutions consider all implications as projects and changes take shape. CFTs have become more popular in recent years for three primary reasons: “they improve coordination and integration; they span organizational boundaries; and they reduce the production cycle time in new product development” (Inc.com 2020). However, cross-functional work can get messy. According to Kashyap (2019), the simplest definition of building a cross-functional team is to put together a group of people with different functional expertise so that they can use their expertise to achieve a common goal. When working on interdepartmental teams, there can often be issues with accountability, differences in wants/needs, and variations in skill or comfort level with the given work (including the challenges today of

working virtually). The structure of cross-functional teams is complex. In contrast to a departmental team, CFTs include hierarchical, lateral, and interterm dependencies that require continuous negotiation (Dennison, *et al.* 1996).

Shared objectives are important whether a CFT is working on a time-limited, long-term, or project-orientated task. Successful CFTs require a shared commitment, a purposeful and deliberate timeline, and, most of all, role assignments. When reviewing and assigning the roles of a project team, institutions must consider strengths and expertise as well as the capability and willingness to work on a team that requires collaboration across departments. The following are examples of roles created at Tri-C that institutions can apply to campus CFTs.

Cross-Functional Team Roles

The Preparer

The preparer is the team member who feeds the team information and upholds the goals and timeline. The person in this role prepares the team agenda and is the point person for all information in and out of the group. Although this person may not create the goal, their focus on the goal is perhaps one of the most important elements. The preparer provides project members with a common frame of reference and promotes a higher level of cross-functional cooperation (McDonough 2000).

The preparer, in many ways, is the unofficial leader of the group (*see* “The Leader” below). McDonough (2000) also refers to this role as the *enabler*. A notable characteristic about this role is that it does not have to be a member of senior management. Preparers can champion a project from any level of the organization. As such, this gives the preparer the unique opportunity to develop and nurture their leadership skills.

The preparer is someone who has the time (and energy) to ensure the group has all of the resources they need to accomplish a task successfully. A preparer has job responsibilities that are closely aligned with the project on the table.

The Tracker

Simply stated, the tracker takes notes and tracks the group’s progress toward the goal. One could also consider the tracker the historian of the group. In smaller teams, the preparer can also take on this role, but the team functions best when there is someone designated to do it. According to Dennison, Hart and Kahn (1996), there is a demand for functional representation in a CFT. While being creative is important, the tracker plays an important and practical role during, and in between, team meetings.

The tracker keeps record of who attends meetings and what each team member commits to contributing before the next meeting. Trackers always share notes with the broader group; this increases personal accountability. In addition, it gives the leader of the team a frame of reference when holding team members responsible for the work they have promised to do.

In addition to meeting minutes, trackers can choose to chart the work of the team in a spreadsheet or cloud-based software. This makes team efforts easy to share with upper management and, again, increases the level of accountability.

The Leader

The leader on the team typically is in a senior position and leads the meeting. In addition, the person in this role ensures the accuracy of information, establishes team goals, focuses and encourages the team, and resolves any contentious situations. The role of the leader is to make all team members feel accountable and ensure all are contributing.

The leader also (often) determines who should be on the team. (A high-level administrator might also determine the team members). This is probably the most important decision. Selecting the right roles and people to fill them is critical to the success of the team. For example, in the case study below, an academic counselor is a critical role to the success of the described CFT. That role needs to be occupied by the person who has the right experience, skill set, and understands the importance of collaborating with other team members. As stated above, working across departments can get

messy. The right people can typically make adjustments, if their role at the college allows that flexibility. Selecting the right person for each role will be critical to the team reaching its goals, and a leader must be able to make those important decisions.

Lastly, the leader provides guidance, motivation, and resources to the team. The team will need guidance during the project (especially with timelines and metrics). Teams will need to understand their collective progress and adjust as needed to meet desired goals or results. The leader motivates the team by communicating the value of the team's collective work, rather than a singular focus on the end goal. Further, the leader supports the team by removing any obstacles, providing feedback, encouraging creativity, and providing access to resources. The team could lose momentum if they do not believe the leader can support them as they progress toward meeting the CFT's objectives.

The Worker Bees

Worker bees are a group of individuals collectively brought together to pursue a common goal. The worker bees are the individuals who make things happen. They take the framework of the team and put it into motion. These individuals have the time and skill level to perform tasks associated with the team's goal. Each individual brings their own experience and expertise to the team. Although worker bees may work on separate assignments, they take collective action that advances the team toward goal completion. It is very important for this group to have standing meetings with the leader, preparer, and tracker to share ideas, successes, and failures.

The worker bee role is crucial. They move the needle, progressing toward the goal by completing most of the CFT's tactical assignments. The worker bees like to be valued for their contribution and, thus, the leader should recognize them for accomplishing tasks (see the leader description above). Acknowledging a job well done builds strength among individuals as well as the collective group progressing toward a common goal.

Although worker bees are not leading the team, they experiment with new ideas. Encouraging experimentation and process improvements provides motivation to

individuals as they continue to progress toward the end goal. It is critical that they are given the opportunity to contribute to the inter-workings of the CFT; this allows them to feel valued and take ownership over their role on the team.

One of the expectations of the worker bees is that they come prepared to update the leader and preparer on their progress on assigned tasks. These updates allow the leader and preparer to analyze and adjust the goal or timeline depending on progress. This also allows the leader to evaluate the performance of individual team members, understand the CFT progress as a whole, and make any necessary changes to keep the project moving in a positive direction.

Cross-Functional Team Wrap Up

Now that team roles have been reviewed, it is important to emphasize a few additional points:

Power Struggles Still Exist

Power dynamics among teams and functional organizations can greatly limit the autonomy of a team and must be managed proactively (Dennison, *et al.* 1996). Although many institutions have been using CFT models for some time, depending on the project or the goal, there often is still a power struggle and adjustment period. Depending on the people assigned to the team and their willingness to participate, senior leadership may need to step in if the team is not functioning as desired. For example, struggle often shows up when leaders assign administrative employees to worker bee roles. There is an assumption here that this may be because those employees have gotten used to delegation and/or have more macro-level responsibilities that are quite the opposite of the tasks typically given to worker bees.

Goals are Critical

The end goal should be discussed and present at all meetings. When a team's mission is a moving target, its power is diminished (Dennison, *et al.* 1996, 1012). In addition, that is when CFT projects and meetings become ongoing, rather than teams completing a task, implementing recommendations, and moving on to the next.

Preparer, Tracker, Leader, Worker Bee and Beyond

The list of roles does not end with preparer, tracker, leader, and worker bee. McDonough (2000) suggests not only different names for team members, but also additional roles, such as a champion who would help overcome any resistance to the team and/or project by management. In addition, research shows that all of the roles (regardless of their names) are critical to the function of the team. Strong team leaders (with superior interpersonal skills) can play an instrumental role in facilitating relationships and promoting integration across functions (McDonough 2000).

Accountability

Accountability has been a theme throughout this article. But what is even better than team members feeling like they are accountable to the team? Commitment. As McDonough (2000) asserts, if there is just the right mix of human resources, skills, and expertise on the CFT, it may enhance each members' confidence in each other. This confidence may then increase the willingness of team members to commit themselves to a successful end result. If that chemistry does not exist, the leader's role, supported by senior leadership, becomes even more vital.

Collaborative decision-making and shared responsibility across departments can be messy and time consuming. However, working collaboratively in CFTs can create a system to improve institutional practices. The following will depict collaboration at work at Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C) in Cleveland, Ohio.

Case Study: Tri-C's Cross-Functional Team Model

Tri-C is a multi-campus institution that serves 55,000 students annually. The four campuses are located within or around the city of Cleveland, Ohio. Tri-C was Ohio's first community college and remains the oldest and largest (Cuyahoga Community College 2018). The college ranks first in Ohio and 25th in the country in conferring associate's degrees.

In 2012, the Tri-C brought in new leadership who began to shift the conversation from a culture of evidence to inquiry as well as began to emphasize completion in addition to enrollment. This conversation was timely as the state began to change its community college funding model to disperse funds based upon course completions, student progress, and completion rather than enrollment.

With an IPEDS graduation rate of 3.6 percent, Tri-C was not graduating students at the same rate as its peer institutions. College leadership made the IPEDS graduation rate a top priority. In order for the graduation rate to improve, the college created the IPEDS completion team. The team consisted of a central point person from the college's district office who would serve as the coordinator. The goal was to improve the IPEDS graduation rate by 3 percent. In a very short window of time, the college assembled a team to do this work quickly. Simultaneously, the college created a model in which students in the 2011 IPEDS cohort would be case managed with the help of campus teams.

As teams formed, the need for cross-function became apparent. Students in the midst of obtaining their degree or certificate have a myriad of needs, such as academic counseling, success coaching, and financial and schedule needs. For this reason, the "birth" of the cross-functional IPEDS team was almost organic. Employees from every department of the college got involved. Faculty provided outreach to students in their classes, and academic deans ensured that the course schedules met the needs of students close to completion. Success specialists made phone calls, sent emails, and followed up with students in their classrooms. Academic counselors worked with students on obtainable completion plans. Financial aid advisors ensured that students had the funding they needed to see graduation and beyond. It was truly a team effort. Below is an example of the Cuyahoga Community College Western Campus IPEDS team.

- *The Leader*—Dean of Student Affairs
- *The Preparer*—Completion, Project Manager
- *The Tracker*—Completion, Project Manager

■ *Worker Bees*—Academic Counselor, Director of Trio, Retention Officer, Assistant Dean of Counseling, Transfer Specialist, Representatives from Black American Council, Hispanic Council, and a Student Success Specialist.

Although these roles were not predetermined early on in the process, they emerged over the time. Team members either naturally gravitated toward one role or another, or the team leader delegated responsibilities. Over years of practice, these roles have helped make Tri-C's cross-functional team successful. Each of Tri-C's campuses now replicates this model. The college's cross-functional approach to case managing a large group of students has proven successful; the college's graduation rate has increased more than 20 percent since 2014.

Conclusion

Collaborative decision-making and shared responsibility is more than just bringing people together. It is about understanding the value of a diverse, well-constructed team of individuals who bring their experience and expertise to help achieve a common goal. CFTs are a great example of how this can be accomplished. Working in this way enables higher educational professionals to be nimble and adaptable. This adaptability was (and will continue to be) critical as we work through our new post-pandemic environment. CFTs may be messy and complex at times; however, working collaboratively and establishing roles creates a system of accountability and improved institutional practices. At Tri-C, cross-functional teams have brought perspective on how departments can work together to improve student success and completion in a significant and tangible way.

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