

Knowledge Worker

There's a New SME in Town

(September 2013)

You know what an SME is, right? A subject matter expert. Nope; not any more. There's a new SME in town and this use of SME stands for "Self-Managed Employee."

A long, long time ago, in a place far, far away, known as "the industrial era," management had things pretty well under control. Work was materials-based and working – for legions of people – involved interactions with tools and materials in order to produce tangible outcomes known as "products." Working was a highly visible, physical activity and the "one best way" could be identified and prescribed in the form of a linear procedure. Moreover, compliance with that one best way could be enforced through a combination of supervision and sanctions. Markets were local, regional, maybe national and rarely global.

Then things changed. The base of work shifted from materials to information; working became a non-linear mental activity instead of a linear manual activity (working also dropped out of sight, making direct supervision impossible); interactions shifted from materials to information (often in the form of other people); and markets have become increasingly global, meaning that everything is going on everywhere all the time. To New York's reputation as "the city that never sleeps," we can now add countless corporations that also never sleep. They, too, are on 24/7. Change and complexity are both increasing and accelerating, leaving little time for the up and down and up again of a command-and-control management system.

More than a few organizations have adjusted to this tectonic plate shift in the world of work and working by abandoning command and moving control to the working level. They have come to rely on self-managed teams. There is abundant evidence that self-managed teams can produce extraordinary gains in productivity and performance. Guess what? Teams, like organizations, are made up of individuals and, like organizations, teams don't do anything, people do. Just as individual outcomes are the building blocks of organizational results so, too, are they the building blocks of team results. What makes a team different from simply a group of people is the fact that they communicate, cooperate and collaborate so that their individual actions and outcomes contribute in an integrated way to some larger outcome. Even so, they are still individuals and they are still SMEs.

There are, then, two great challenges confronting the leadership of many organizations. First, what can they do to improve the ability of employees to manage their own performance and how can management and employees cooperate and collaborate so as to link individual actions and outcomes to the larger outcomes sought for the organization? Second, how can management best support the successful achievement of outcomes at the individual employee level? This second challenge is far from being a simple gesture of good will. You see, as said earlier, organizations don't do or achieve anything; people do. Performance consists of actions and the outcomes they produce. Individual outcomes are the building blocks of team and organizational performance. In order for an organization to achieve anything, people must achieve outcomes at their level. Success, then, has to be mutual and shared.

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Lest you think I'm laying all this on management's shoulders, I'm not. These new SMEs are every bit as responsible as their managers for improving their ability to manage their own performance. Just as success has to be mutual and shared, so does the responsibility for making that happen.

Dig a little deeper into the world of this new SME and some very interesting questions begin to crop up. What is the skill set of a self-managed employee? What is the knowledge-base of a self-managed employee? How is that skill set and knowledge base best developed? How are outcomes at the level of the individual best determined and articulated? How does management track and integrate on an enterprise-wide level what are likely hundreds and possibly thousands of outcomes at the individual level? How does management effect a shift in the role of the employee from one of compliant actor sticking to a predetermined script to that of an agent acting on the employer's behalf and in the employer's best interest? Where and how do employees acquire the knowledge and know-how to manage their own performance? Where and how does management acquire the know-how to pull this off?

Well, I would hope many of the answers could be found at ISPI. I am concerned that they won't. I fear our history has left us, along with way too many managers, suffering from a mindset which says, "We manage *their* performance" instead of one that leads us to focus on helping them manage their own performance. What do you think?

References

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About the Author

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