
Title	Senior management teams in schools: An initial picture
Author(s)	Kenneth Stott and Allan Walker
Source	<i>ERA Conference 1992, Singapore, 24-26 September 1992</i>
Organised by	Educational Research Association of Singapore (ERAS)

This document may be used for private study or research purpose only. This document or any part of it may not be duplicated and/or distributed without permission of the copyright owner.

The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document.

**SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAMS IN SCHOOLS :
AN INITIAL PICTURE**

**KENNETH STOTT
ALLAN WALKER**

Paper presented at the
Educational Research Association (ERA) - 6th Annual Conference
held in Singapore from September 24-26, 1992

NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
LIBRARY, SINGAPORE

SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAMS IN SCHOOLS: AN INITIAL PICTURE

Kenneth Stott
Nanyang Technological University

Allan Walker
Northern Territory University

INTRODUCTION

There is an increasing recognition in the management literature that the effective use of teams produces outcomes that may be superior to those arrived at by managers working alone. This is often based on an acceptance that organisations today must operate in increasingly complex and dynamic environments which necessitate more creative strategies for solving problems. Schools must also operate in constantly changing contexts and the use of teams to make complex decisions may be becoming more important.

Recent literature promotes the benefits of teams in organisations from outcome, quality and interpersonal perspectives. Claims suggest that teams avoid duplication of effort, increase cooperation, spur new ideas, help people solve problems, maintain motivation, improve product quality, increase profits and accelerate growth (Chance, 1989:18; George, 1977:78; Peterson, 1991:38; Timmons, 1979; 200). There also appears to be agreement that team management has advantages over autocratic styles of leadership. This is due largely to the complexity of the environments in which many modern day organisations operate. Schools are typical examples of such organisations and there are strong arguments to extend the scope of team management and, more specifically, management teams.

Little research has been conducted in the area of senior management teams in non-western countries, although there exists literature discussing team development and different cultures (Rigby, 1987). As far as we are aware, there exists no literature about Senior Management Teams (SMT) in schools from a cross-national perspective. An investigation into this area as part of a broader focus may reveal useful findings.

If teams are to have a larger part to play in managing schools in the near future, in any system, the issue of development comes to the fore. It would be misplaced optimism to believe that simply locking half a dozen or so willing people in a room for an hour every couple of weeks would transform institutional management. The work of teams has to be developed, like other features of organisational life.

THE STUDY

Our broad concern focused on Senior Management Teams and the

degree to which their development was planned for. Before that question could be answered with any degree of coherence, however, we needed some information about the current scene. The study reported in this paper is the first stage of an on-going four stage project and attempted to paint a basic picture of Senior Management Teams in schools in two different settings from principals' perspectives.

More specifically, the study aimed to address a range of general issues that would provide a clearer picture about senior management teams in schools, how they were used, and their leader's beliefs about good practice and development. The second purpose was to gather information from principals in two different national settings (Northern Territory [NT] and Singapore) and compare their perceptions about SMT related issues.

METHODOLOGY

Principals of five primary and five secondary schools in Singapore and Northern Territory (Australia) were interviewed at their workplace by the researchers. Government and Parochial schools were included in the sample and both genders represented. The majority of interviews took place over a one month period. Sessions lasted between 45 minutes and one hour.

Data was collected through a 10 item semi-structured questionnaire and sought answers in several important areas, such as the purposes of senior management teams, the types of issues they address, predominant decision making modes and what, if any, strategies are employed to improve the operational effectiveness of teams? Data were tabulated using a standard format for each question, and the researchers analysed the information independently. These analyses were then exchanged, discussion took place, and finally a jointly agreed analysis section was drawn up. Data were analysed from overall, country and level (primary or secondary) perspectives.

FINDINGS

Findings are presented in the areas of: purpose, issues dealt with, criteria for agenda, principals' roles, problem presentation and decision making, effectiveness criteria, and development.

Purpose

In general terms, three major purposes were identified by principals: decision making, monitoring and feedback, and planning and policy formation. Decision making was mentioned by over ninety percent of schools. Purposes relating to maintaining morale were mentioned by only two schools, both of them NT secondary institutions. Most responses related to management team meetings and the processes used in them. Few respondents

mentioned any purposes outside the face-to-face meeting structure. Decision making was the most frequently mentioned purpose, but the extent to which team members were allowed to participate in the process was not clear.

Issues dealt with

The major issues dealt with by SMTs related to the curriculum, budget and resources, and staff development and welfare. All schools covered items relating to programmes and curriculum matters, but Singaporean schools identified many more items. There were differences between the two systems. Major events featured prominently in Singaporean responses, while pupil welfare was mentioned by six NT schools. Deployment was noted by several schools in each system, but in Singapore, it was concerned mostly with allocation of staff to extracurricular activities. NT schools were more concerned with welfare issues than their Singaporean counterparts. Very few items relating to external issues (the school's relationship with the outside world, including parents) were identified by schools from either system.

Criteria for agenda

There was diversity in responses as to how principals decided what items the SMT should deal with, reflecting a general uncertainty about the criteria actually used. Most NT schools identified the general criterion of whether the matter was a whole school issue or not. NT schools also mentioned the impact of the decision; Singaporean respondents did not. There was little agreement or understanding in either setting. One principal acknowledged this and explained that there was often uncertainty about what to do.

Principals' roles

A large number of 'self-roles' were identified by the principals, from being subservient to the team at one end of the scale, to being director and leader at the other. Although most principals perceived themselves as playing multiple roles, two major roles emerged, those of facilitator and leader, and these were identified by most Singaporean secondary and NT primary schools. Three primary school principals in Singapore described themselves as team members, while some respondents saw themselves as flexible enough to be both facilitators and leaders.

Problem presentation and decision making

We asked principals about the ways in which problems were presented to the SMT. There was an almost unanimous perception in both settings that a democratic process was followed, with the problem being stated and no solutions offered. Despite this, two Singaporean secondary principals said they would still know before the meeting the answers they wanted, but they felt it was

good for the team to find such answers themselves. One of these respondents stated that the management team would know instinctively what the principal wanted.

Respondents were also asked to prioritise three decision making methods according to their normal practice in management meetings. The first option - the team makes decisions - represents a completely consensual mode, with the principal accepting the decisions of the team. The other options give the principal more control over the outcome.

All Singaporean secondary principals put the consensual option last on their lists. They appeared more directive than their primary colleagues and all the Australian principals. They tended to use their teams in advisory and consultative capacities and not as consensus decision making bodies. Different patterns of responses emerged for each grouping of schools, although most of the NT schools used the consensus option as first choice.

Effectiveness criteria

Respondents were asked what criteria they used to judge the effectiveness of management teams. A long list of criteria emerged but these were isolated and there was no general agreement. NT principals mentioned competence and knowledge, having the right membership, being on task, and loyalty as major criteria. The most common responses from Singaporean principals centred on promoting open views and having common goals. The general pattern between the two systems were similar: both concentrated on issues connected with the team's functioning, and some mention was given to the nature of individual inputs. Few criteria were identified in relation to the task, and the question of organisational support for the work of the senior management team received one solitary mention from a Singaporean secondary respondent.

Development

The final question related to purposeful development activities. It was made clear to respondents that information was sought on the activities they undertook with the specific purpose of improving the work of their management teams. Data were not required on any incidental development that might accrue from the team's regular activities. In essence, very few specifically developmental activities appeared to take place.

Singaporean principals organised occasional social gatherings, but most of the activities were peripheral and not designed to really enhance development. Debriefings, seminars and shifting the chairmanship may have had some effect. Two schools encouraged individual development, but did not explain how this might facilitate team development.

DISCUSSION

A number of issues emerged from this study. We have drawn out what we consider to be several of the more important points in need of attention.

Although a wide range of typical issues covered in management meetings was mentioned, there were few strong patterns across schools or systems. Individual schools seemed to have their own issues and there was no obvious separation of responsibility. Welfare issues were mentioned more frequently than development issues. This is somewhat surprising, since planning for overall staff development would seem to fall clearly within the domain of senior staff.

Most of the issue areas mentioned were concerned with programmes and academic matters, and extracurricular activities. The two areas that received comparatively little attention related to external issues and morale (satisfaction of staff and students). In both Singapore and the NT, much attention is being devoted to the school's relationship with its external environment. It seems strange that such central issues were not more prominent on senior management team agendas. The lower emphasis on welfare issues in Singaporean schools may also have repercussions on the quality of school life.

Principals did not appear to know with any degree of certainty what criteria they used in deciding which matters should be shared with their colleagues. Although there was a general level of agreement on 'whole school issues' as a determining factor, the issues may have been quite trivial. One implication of this may be that items dealt with at senior management team meetings are put in indiscriminately. It was surprising that criteria such as expertise, time, depth of issue, impact, involving the whole staff, and criticality, received such limited mention when these are quite prevalent in the literature. The criteria for senior management team involvement may need to be more clearly defined.

Principals in both contexts perceived their role in SMTs in similar ways - these sometimes appeared confused and contradictory. While principals may believe playing a large number of roles displays a certain amount of versatility, some of the roles could arguably have been covered by their team members if the management teams had been fully utilised. It seems that many principals feel they have to assume responsibility for the full range of behavioural roles.

The finding that all the principals preferred to state the problem at management team meetings rather than to imply any form of solution seemed inconsistent with some of the other data. We should remember at this point, however, that it was the principals who gave their responses and these represent their perceptions of how they act. A picture involving other members of the SMT may well indicate this process is seldom used, and the

principal is more likely to either offer a solution for discussion or a decision for comment. Whereas NT schools conferred a large degree of autonomy in regards to decision making on the team, their Singaporean counterparts seemed unlikely to let go completely. It may be that Singaporean principals are governed by a stricter set of centrally defined expectations which view school leaders as 'the' decision makers, making it too big a shift to locate responsibility with the team.

In terms of the criteria of management team effectiveness, the principal's views were arguably too limited. The emphasis on team functioning was perhaps overstated and issues such as systematic task completion, individual skill development, and organisational support were underemphasised. There was an emphasis in Singaporean schools on the criterion of shared goals, but the literature suggests that such sharing comes through real and extended involvement; yet the principals were reluctant to give this. Management team effectiveness is likely to be achieved only if several factors are accounted for. Principals seem to be aware of team process factors, but they may also have to consider the importance of individual satisfaction and development, systematic task processes, and the way in which the school as an organisation supports team membership and performance.

Responses about effectiveness were vital because the principal's views on what makes a team effective would probably determine any development emphases. From the responses it appeared that if they were to implement any development activities, they would most likely be concerned with team processes and relationships, and not with individual, task or organisational support. In actual fact, the effectiveness emphases were not critical, because little conscious development took place. The occasional lunch or social event may help to build relationships, but in terms of team development, it is peripheral. It may be a serious omission to neglect the development of the performance of what is probably the most important team in the school.

SUMMARY

In this paper we described some of the findings of the first stage of a multi-stage study examining Senior Management Teams in schools. We began by providing the context of the study and describing the methodology and some limitations. Findings were presented and briefly commented upon, and some tentative conclusions were drawn, both from a general and comparative perspective.

Findings showed that there was substantial variation in the criteria used by education leaders to evaluate team effectiveness and that there appeared to be considerable inefficiencies in determining appropriate problem agendas for management teams. Certain purposes for using teams featured prominently, while other possible purposes were ignored. There were also notable

differences between the two systems in the ways decisions were made.

REFERENCES

Chance, P. (1989) 'Great experiments in team chemistry', *Across the Board*, 26,5, 18-25.

George, W. (1977) 'Task teams for rapid growth', *Harvard Business Review*, March/April, 71.

Peterson D. (1991) *Teamwork: New Management Ideas for the Nineties*, Victor Gollancz: London.

Rigby, J (1987) 'The challenge of multinational team development', *Journal of Management Development*, 6,3, 65-72.

Timmons, J. (1979) 'Careful self-analysis and team assessment can aid entrepreneurs', *Harvard Business Review*, Nov/Dec, 198.