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Introduction

KEEPSAFE, a company producing fridges, freezers, and cold rooms for both domestic and industrial use, faced significant operational challenges in 2024 due to its reliance on individual effort rather than team-based working. The new owners recognised the importance of structured teamwork to improve efficiency, innovation, and market expansion, particularly in neglected markets such as Alaska, Siberia, and Iceland. This report analyses the development and performance of the KEEPSAFE leadership team using Tuckman's stages of team development, Belbin's team roles, and the Thomas-Kilmann conflict resolution model.

Team Development – Tuckman's Model

Tuckman's model includes the stages: Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing. During Meeting 1, the KEEPSAFE team was in the Forming stage, characterised by politeness, formal communication, and uncertainty about roles and objectives. Members were cautious and trust had not yet developed (Tuckman, 1965).

Meeting 2 illustrated the Storming stage, where conflict arose over leadership of sub-groups. Members expressed disagreement, shouted, and some withdrew, displaying tension and resistance common in Storming. Effective leadership was crucial to navigate this phase, maintaining focus on deadlines and encouraging constructive participation.

By Meetings 3 and 4, the team moved into Norming, establishing structured sub-groups, collaborative processes, and clear responsibilities. Members began consulting across functions, demonstrating cohesion and shared problem-solving. The final progress reports and engagement with external specialists reflected early Performing, where the team functioned effectively to achieve objectives (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977).

Team Roles – Belbin

Belbin's team role theory identifies functional and behavioural contributions necessary for effective teamwork (Belbin, 2010). At KEEPSAFE, Nick functioned as a Coordinator, providing direction and integrating team efforts, while Sylvia (HR) acted as a Teamworker, fostering patience and collaboration. Tom (Facilities) took on a liaison role, facilitating communication between sub-groups, similar to Belbin's Resource Investigator or Monitor Evaluator.

The diversity of roles ensured that technical expertise (Engineering, IT), operational insight (Facilities, Security), and strategic functions (Finance, Sales, Legal) were integrated. Initial conflict arose partly because members underestimated the importance of complementary roles. Recognising individual strengths and allocating responsibilities accordingly allowed the team to operate more efficiently and reduced interpersonal tension, aligning with Belbin's assertion that balanced teams perform better.

Conflict Management – Thomas-Kilmann Model

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) outlines five approaches to handling conflict: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating (Thomas & Kilmann, 2008). In Meeting 2, the team displayed competing behaviours, with members arguing over sub-group leadership, while some adopted avoiding, refusing to participate.

Nick's leadership, combined with Sylvia's intervention, encouraged a collaborating approach, enabling members to discuss proposals and rotate leadership roles across projects. Employing this collaborative strategy allowed the team to integrate diverse perspectives, resolve disputes constructively, and maintain focus on the shared objective. Bringing in an external engineering specialist to solve technical problems exemplified effective problem-solving and conflict resolution.

Practical Recommendations

To further enhance team performance at KEEPSAFE, several measures are recommended:

1. Structured Team Meetings: Regular meetings with clear agendas and roles to maintain focus and accountability.
2. Role Clarification: Early assessment of individual strengths and Belbin role alignment to reduce conflict and improve efficiency.

3. Conflict Resolution Training: Providing training on TKI strategies to equip members to manage disagreements proactively.

4. Cross-Functional Liaison: Encourage members like Tom to coordinate between sub-groups, ensuring communication flows and dependencies are addressed.

5. Performance Monitoring: Implement feedback loops and progress reporting to management without micromanaging, reinforcing autonomy while ensuring alignment with objectives.

Conclusion

The KEEPSAFE case illustrates the transformation from a siloed, individual-focused work culture to a collaborative, team-based approach. By applying Tuckman's stages of development, recognising Belbin team roles, and employing Thomas-Kilmann conflict management strategies, the leadership team achieved effective collaboration, problem-solving, and decision-making. Structured processes, clear role allocation, and collaborative conflict resolution were key to overcoming initial challenges and achieving objectives.

References

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