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The
use of cross-functional
teams in public
administration

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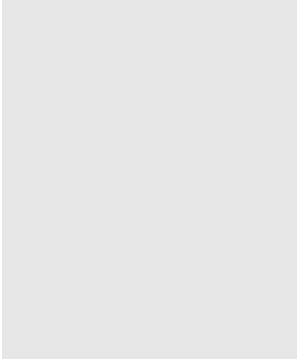
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Authors

Nathalie Haug

Nathalie Haug studied the bachelor's and master's degree in Politics and Public Administration at the University of Konstanz. She focused on administration and management. In her master's thesis, she examined how cooperation works in cross-functional teams and how local government should be designed to give cross-functional teams the right environment. In addition to her studies, she worked at the Chair of Public Administration and worked on digitalization topics as part of the EU CoVAL project.

Contact: nathalie.haug@uni-konstanz.de

Twitter: @nathalieHPunkt

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How can cross-functional teams be implemented in the public sector?

Abstract

Cross-functional teams have been successfully used in the private sector for many years to develop innovative products. Cross-functional teams are teams whose members come from different departments of the organization. How this potential can be used for public administration is the topic of this article.

To be able to use cross-functional teams, the following context factors should be created: providing the team with enough staff and time, as well as granting the team sufficient autonomy to make decisions. This enables the team members to work together efficiently. In addition, the standard operating procedures of the administration should act in concert with the processes in the team. If this is the case, the content developed within the team is optimally fed back to the decision-makers and no time delays occur. The social skills of the team members should be trained so that the different views of the team members can be incorporated into the discussion within the team. Relevant social skills include, for example, openness to other points of view and dealing with conflicts constructively.

Context

In the private sector, cross-functional teams matter for developing innovative products successfully. As team members come from different departments, that are involved in the product development process, the different knowledge about, for example, standard operating procedures of the product development process, is bundled within the team. The different professional backgrounds of the team members lead also to different perspectives on problem situations that may arise in the product development process. Therefore, problems are solved quicker (Jassawalla & Sashittal, 1999).

Although the main task of public administration is not product development, challenges such as demographic change, digitalization and changing demands of the population on the service provision pose problems for public administrations (Head, 2008), which can be solved by the use of cross-functional teams. For example, cross-functional teams can be used for the development of new services or the redesign of administrative processes. They offer an opportunity to involve all participants in the design process, so that by integrating the different perspectives and experiences, a solution is created, from which the entire administration can benefit.

Method

There is little research in public administration that examines cooperation within cross-functional teams or the context factors for successful corporation. Therefore, a qualitative, interpretative approach is justified, as it aims to develop theoretical foundations that can be tested

and refined in further research (Haverland & Yanow, 2012). For the data collection, 22 qualitative interviews with team members in three projects were conducted. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed in a two-step process (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

How do cross-functional teams in public administration work?

The communication and discussion processes that were identified in the cooperation within a cross-functional team are presented below. In cross-functional teams, these communication and discussion processes are particularly important since they integrate the different perspectives and expertise of the team members in the development of new products or services. In addition, the context factors that influence these processes are described. These include on the one hand the social skills of the team members and on the other hand the resources and autonomy of the team as well as processes within the surrounding organization.

Mode of cooperation: communication and discussion

Cooperation in cross-functional teams is divided into communication and discussion processes. They form the basis for successful cooperation. Communication processes, if they are open, respectful, and personal, ensure that the different views of the team members are integrated into the decision-making process. The discussion ensures that the team members understand the different points of view and that a solution is found that all team members agree on. Furthermore, the discussions also serve as a tool for information exchange. For example, the team members discuss their progress in the project and share their expertise about contact persons or processes within their home departments. This is the key difference between a cross-functional team and other team compositions, as the team members make exclusive knowledge from their departments available to other team members.

Context factors for successful corporation

For communication and discussion processes to run smoothly, the following factors must be in place for cross-functional teams in public administration.

Social Competences

At the team member level, it is important that team members have the appropriate social skills. These include a respectful attitude towards each other, openness to the views of other team members as well as the ability to solve conflicts constructively. Those skills are important for cross-functional teams, as the team leads to an increased conflict potential due to different perspectives and professional backgrounds of the team members.

In addition, the willingness to cooperate plays a role. If a team member wants to cooperate, is expressed in two ways. First, team members are willing to invest the time and energy in the cooperation that is necessary to complete the task. Secondly, the willingness to share information with the (foreign) team members increases. A low willingness to cooperate can affect the progress of the project negatively, since the interpersonal differences in the discussion must first be discussed before the team can turn to work on its tasks.

Resources of the cross-functional team

The resources of the team influence the cooperation processes of the cross-functional team. It is particularly important that the team is of sufficient size and composition, so that all team members from the relevant departments are represented. The time resources of the team members are closely linked to this: the team members need adequate time to complete their tasks. If this is not the case, this can have a negative effect on project progress, since fewer tasks are completed, or they require more time. In the worst case, the team members reduce their workload for the project to avoid neglecting their daily business. Financial resources for collaboration are less relevant. This could be due to the fact, that the teams examined for this working paper are embedded in projects receive financial support from the state and therefore no budget funds from the city administration were required.

Autonomy and transparent processes within the organization

The organizational structure influences the cooperation through the autonomy of the team. If the team can make decisions independently, decision-making is accelerated and the uncertainty in discussions is reduced. This promotes team cooperation.

However, a low level of autonomy of the team is not necessarily an obstacle to teamwork. A low level of autonomy of the team is reflected in the fact that it is dependent on decisions by decision-makers outside the team. If the decisions that are regulated by the process structures in the administration are communicated transparently to the team, the team has the possibility to react adequately to difficulties that arise. Thus, a successful cooperation is ensured even if team autonomy is low.

Practical implications

The following practical implications are directed to decision makers who want to implement cross-functional teams in a public administration.

1. Ensure that your team has enough resources

Before the team starts working together, the allocation of time and personnel resources should be clarified. If there is a lack of staff in the administration, it is important to create additional positions, so that the team can devote itself fully to its tasks. If it is not possible to create additional positions, it is necessary to set clear priorities and to communicate them. For example, a manager can symbolize that it is okay for team members to leave day-to-day business and that they can instead complete tasks relevant for the team's progress. It is also important to consult with the team members on a regular basis in order to identify overload at an early stage.

2. Communicate the decision-making competence of your team transparently

In addition to the resources of the team, it is also important that the decision-making competence of the team is defined and communicated to the team. If the team knows on which content it can decide on and which decisions must be discussed with relevant decision makers, it can discuss project contents and ideas more freely. A further advantage is that uncertainty about the task at hand is reduced.

If the team has little autonomy, it helps to ensure that the team has clear communication channels of with the decision-makers. This ensures that the content developed within the team and adaptations can be made if the opinions between team members and decision-makers differ. As a result, the probability that the results of the teamwork collide with the ideas and goals of the decision-makers, is reduced.

3. Facilitate communication processes within the team

When teamwork has started, the manager should ensure that communication and discussion processes within the team run as smoothly as possible. If disputes arise that endanger team cooperation, one solution is to promote the social skills of the team members. Furthermore, when setting the team up, recruiting team members who already have skills as solving conflicts constructively can be of advantage. Another solution can be to appoint a team leader who can moderate conflict situations and ensure that all team members have their say and that no misunderstandings arise.

The above-mentioned context factors, namely: resource allocation, team autonomy, communication channels between decision-makers and team members, as well as conflict resolution strategies can increase the success of cross-functional teams.

Key Points

Cooperation in cross-functional teams is mainly happening in two processes: communication between team members and discussion about project ideas and project progress. To make this cross-functional cooperation successful, it is important that the team is equipped with sufficient resources. In addition, the team needs to be aware of its decision-making authority to ensure that the discussions are goal oriented. The communication and discussion process themselves are also influenced by the social competence of the team members, as this enables discussions are conducted in a constructive manner. How these processes work in other administrations has not yet been investigated and could be the subject of further research.

Literature

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