The Establishment of a Deaf Employment Task Force in a Major Corporation

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Abstract

The purpose of this article was to propose a model based on a case study of a Deaf Employment Task Force established in a Fortune 500 corporation. The Task Force was composed of representatives from departments that impacted successful deaf employment. Although progress was slow, major accomplishments were realized. Invalid vocational testing was discontinued for all deaf assembly job applicants. Deaf awareness workshops were administered to supervisors and co-workers of deaf employees on a company-wide basis. Setbacks also occurred. Attendance at meetings was unstable, and the Task Force failed to obtain support from top-level management. Based on this experience, the author proposed a model for a Deaf Employment Task Force in a major corporation. The model's components are based on the successes and failures of this case study.

In late 1989, a company-wide Deaf Employment Task Force was established at a Fortune 500 Corporation in Southern California. Approximately two dozen of the company's 50,000 employees were identified as hearing impaired. In the year that followed, a wide array of programs, research projects, and services aimed at enhancing the employment conditions of deaf persons were in development or had been established.

Based on our expertise this article will point out some major issues which must be considered when establishing a corporate-wide Task Force.

Task Force Membership

The Task Force was established with representatives from seven departments: (a) behavioral assessment, (b) vocational assessment from a local community college, (c) legal department, (d) equal opportunity program (EOP), (e) general employment, (f) professional employment, and (g) technical development. An average of 15 individuals made up the Task Force membership at any given time. Some of the representatives were managers, while others were deaf professionals in non-management positions. Additional membership included two representatives from a deaf employee support group and a deaf employment specialist from a local agency.

The inclusion of both deaf and hearing persons with expertise in deafness and deaf culture was productive. In addition to the author, who had prior experience developing programs for deaf persons in other organizations, there were two interpreters and three deaf representatives who provided valuable insight into the needs of their community. The knowledge and expertise of these individuals was crucial to the development of this Task Force.

There were several problems created by the selection of ineffective or inappropriate members for the Task Force. Some of them were as follows:

First, a major problem arose with the inclusion of managers and supervisors as regular members of the Task Force. Many of these individuals had busy schedules and attended Task Force meetings infrequently. Often the Task Force's agenda items had to be postponed, as a representative from the department of focus was not present. For example, it was difficult to discuss the deaf

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hiring process when the General and Professional Employment representatives were absent. With all of the responsibilities of a manager, these individuals openly declined the assignment of action items for the Task Force. Approximately nine months after the establishment of this organization, the management members were unable to attend due to other commitments. They began to send their assistants as representatives. It was discovered that the assistants became more productive members of the Task Force than their managers. They attended every meeting and were willing to perform duties for the group. When decisions were required, the assistants were able to interface with their managers to obtain the necessary authority. With the inclusion of these new members, the Task Force became more productive and action oriented.

Second, it was a great mistake to include hearing individuals from outside agencies as regular members. Since these individuals had no decision making authority within the company, they were incapable of making valuable contributions. Often they would slow down the group's progress by rambling or asking irrelevant questions. The Task Force became more a discussion group and less an action-oriented entity. To further complicate matters, company Task Force members did not feel comfortable discussing sensitive issues in the presence of outsiders. In retrospect, it would have been more effective to have invited outside representatives as guest speakers who would appear at one or two meetings.

Territoriality

When the Task Force implemented action on specific issues, great care was taken not to invade the territory of the managers in individual departments. For example, members of the Task Force were careful not to establish deaf hiring practices without the permission and involvement of the General and Professional Employment Department managers. Legal issues were not investigated without the sanction of the company attorney. The original reason for inviting all of the managers from different departments to join

the Task Force was to obtain their cooperation in facilitating change in the entire system. It was hoped to bring management together with deaf professionals in order to work toward a common goal. Taking action without approval from these department managers could have jeopardized the efforts of the Task Force. Reprimands would have been given to individuals performing unauthorized functions outside of their job descriptions.

The major difficulty in respecting the territory of department managers was knowing where the boundaries lay. What constituted the deaf professional helping another department vs. interfering with that department's function?

Suppose some department managers were not concerned with setting boundaries? Was it acceptable for the deaf professionals to perform functions of another department, even with the approval of that department's manager? There were no clear-cut answers to these questions, as managers held different philosophies on what constituted interference. The three types of managers described below typify the differing viewpoints of Task Force management.

1. The delegating managers - These individuals were glad to have others perform their work. Delegating responsibility to the deaf professionals was viewed as a solution to a heavy workload and a busy schedule. They were not territorial and did not appear threatened when others performed their department's functions. The delegators were not concerned with respecting job boundaries. This described the majority of the original management members of the Task Force.

2. The responsible managers - These individuals assumed all responsibility for their own department functions. The deaf professionals on the Task Force acted only as advisors who helped these individuals perform their jobs. Unfortunately, most of the managers in the group did not fit into this category.

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3. The territorial managers - These individuals rigidly adhered to job boundaries. They did not appreciate and would not allow deaf professionals on the Task Force to help them perform their jobs. This did not mean that these members had time to perform the deaf-related functions themselves. Quite often, programs involving the managers of these departments would not be completed. These members would rather have no one perform the work, if they could not perform it themselves. Their extreme adherence to this philosophy prompted them to complain whenever someone performed functions outside of their job description. This was true, even if the department invaded was not under the authority of the territorial member.

Major clashes on the Task Force resulted from interactions between the delegators and the territorialists. For example, a deaf professional member was reprimanded for attempting to place deaf job applicants within the company. A territorialist made issue of this person working outside of his job description, even though he was informally appointed to do so by the General Employment Manager (a delegator). The complainer was a territorialist not in the General Employment Department, but protested on principle. As a result of such conflict, deaf professionals on the Task Force accepted management appointed responsibility with caution.

Based on the three types of managers described above, the author has outlined three models that could best describe the functioning of the Task Force under each of the different styles of responsibility division. For the purposes of definition, these models are absolute and independent of one another. As individual behavior and philosophies varied, the Task Force took on the components of one or more of the following Division of Responsibility models at any given time.

1. The Territorial model - Each manager performs his or her own functions without assistance on the Task Force. Individual managers are possessive of their departments and their job functions. Interference is not tolerated. Under this model, the purpose of the Task Force is to provide a forum for each manager to report accomplishments to others. Individuals do not work together on common goals. This model is limiting and provides room for error. In one instance, a management member using this model consulted an inappropriate deaf agency for advice without attempting to ask the deaf professionals for an appropriate referral.

2. The Shared Responsibility model - In this model, managers and those in authority on the Task Force are responsible for performing deaf functions related to their department. The deaf professionals may perform research or assist in such projects, but do not take charge. The idea of this model is that the deaf professionals help the managers perform deaf-related functions in their departments. This is the optimal model.

3. The Delegation model - In this model, the management members (or their representatives) attend meetings on an irregular basis and delegate all work and responsibilities to the deaf professionals. They request a great amount of work from their delegates in a short period of time. These same managers do not return phone calls when the deaf professionals have important questions about the projects. This model is not workable because the deaf professionals are in conflict with their immediate supervisors who do not understand why their employees have assumed so much outside responsibility.

As previously stated, the above work styles and models were never demonstrated in the absolute sense. Individuals and interactions were constantly moving on a continuum of these behaviors. If one of the above models was

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chosen to represent the overall process of this Task Force, it would be the delegation model. Two or three of the deaf professionals on the Task Force performed most of the work.

Accountability

Members often did not follow through on their action items. Initially, this could be blamed on an inefficient action item follow-up system. Minutes from the initial meetings did not contain action items lists. Responsibilities were assigned orally at meetings and conveniently forgotten. After a few weeks, it was evident that individual Task Force members were not performing their duties. A new system was developed. The meeting minutes began to include action items lists with names of those responsible for the completion of each item. This new method proved helpful in reminding members of their duties, but still the action items were not carried out. Six months after the establishment of the Task Force, an elaborate system was developed that required action item accountability from all members. Unfinished action items from previous meetings were carried over into the next meeting minutes until they were completed. Toward the end of every meeting, the previous action item list was read aloud to the group. The responsible party for each item would give a progress report. Accountability before the entire group proved to be an excellent motivating force that increased the prompt completion of each action item.

Support from Management

It is the belief of this author that the Task Force could have fared better with strong support from upper management at the vice presidential level. Higher sanctions may have forced the managers in the Task Force to make stronger commitments and demonstrate results from their departments to upper management. Some managers in departments impacting deaf employees declined membership. Without higher support, the Task Force had no company-wide decision making authority. Its minor success lay in the ability of the deaf professionals to convince those managers with departmental authority to make changes.

A major frustration was connected with this group's distance from upper management. When a major company-wide decision affecting deaf employees was to be made, recommendations had to be channeled from the deaf professionals through the chain of command to the upper management levels. The deaf professionals in the Task Force would perform most of the research on a project, but they were not allowed to interface with top management. There were several intermediary middle managers involved. Often decisions resulting from research findings of deaf professionals would be unknown to those performing most of the research. A case in point: The deaf professionals investigated the company's vocational testing of deaf job applicants. A report with recommendations was generated and passed on through the chain of command to the upper level employment representatives. The deaf professionals making these recommendations never met these high-ranking individuals. No mention was made of the outcome to the deaf professionals for several weeks. A decision to discontinue the vocational testing of deaf job applicants was finally communicated to the deaf professionals through the proper channels. This was not optimal communication.

The Task Force held no charter and did not officially exist as a company entity. On more than one occasion, the existence of the Task Force was questioned by management, and at one point it was nearly disbanded.

Corporate-Wide Visibility

One major problem with this organization was its lack of visibility within the company. The vice presidents and several department managers were unaware of its existence. An attempt was made to obtain publicity through the company newsletter. This never materialized. Many of those who could have contributed to this organization's success were unaware of this group.

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Conclusion

Key to the survival of the Task Force was its ability to produce tangible, company-wide results. When justifying the Task Force's existence to middle management, it was important to show tangible results that had been accomplished on a company-wide basis (since this was a company-wide task force). Although many accomplishments were subtle and non-tangible (e.g. changing one individual's attitude toward deafness), the concrete, large-scale accomplishments looked better on paper. Two such successes were achieved. The first one involved research on the current vocational testing of deaf job applicants. It resulted in the elimination of deaf vocational testing company-wide. As a consequence a few deaf applicants who previously failed these tests were hired . The employment of these individuals was concrete proof of the Task Force's success. The most visible accomplishment, however, was the administration of several deaf awareness workshops to supervisors and co-workers of deaf employees. These workshops were inexpensive and became known to management throughout the company. Feedback forms containing positive comments from workshop participants could be shown to any manager who questioned the Task Force's usefulness. Although proposals and research were important, the highly visible completed projects with tangible results convinced management that this group was making a worthwhile contribution to the company.

The above model presents the best case scenario for a Deaf Employment Task Force. Many of these elements may not be achievable in certain environments.

It is suggested that other deaf professionals who have established a Deaf Employment Task Force or Deaf Services Program in a major corporation document their experiences to further the research and development in this field. It may be beneficial to form a national network of those involved in such endeavors. Members of this network could pool their resources in order to improve the employment process for deaf individuals across the country.