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Administration and Cross-Functional Teams in Libraries: A Case Study in Failures and Solutions

Joy Perrin, Digital Resources Librarian, Texas Tech University Library

Justin Daniel, Systems Librarian, Texas Tech University Library

Introduction

The implementation of cross-functional teams in libraries can be difficult with multiple people coming together to do a task that is often outside of their job description. While the interworking of effective teams is important, the focus of this article is on the administration of cross-functional teams and how it can easily go astray and solutions to those problems. Cross-functional teams are common in libraries because of the need for collaboration between different functional units. Since many tasks affect different aspects of a library, they also could benefit from those area's involvement in the process. This is why cross-functional teams are so appealing to library administrators. However, cross-functional teams (teams created with people from different units, different departments, or different job factions) present additional challenges to administrators. Cross-functional teams need new administrative lines developed in order to function. Effectively managing cross-functional teams requires extra effort and attention from administrators.

To illustrate this point, this article presents a case study of cross-functional teams focused on web development and maintenance at a single institution. The article will help administrators understand the challenges cross-functional teams can face and how to prevent the problems from happening or correct them once they have happened. It is important for administrators to consider these problems before creating cross-functional teams because without this knowledge

of potential problems and their solutions, administrators can often repeat mistakes, unintentionally sabotaging even the most effective teams.

Literature Review

Different Kinds of Teams

According to Katzenback & Smith, there are three different kinds of teams (2004). Teams that recommend things, teams that do things, and teams that run things. Teams that recommend things are asked to solve particular problems. They usually have predetermined completion dates (2004, 16). Secondly, there are teams that make or do and are not typically dissolved; their work is ongoing. Lastly, teams that run things tend to manage other teams, and they are usually at the top of the organization and one of the more difficult types of teams to have. These different types of teams will be referenced in the case presented.

A cross-functional team is comprised of different people from different areas with different experience levels from within the organization who are brought together to work on a project or task (Parker 2003, xi). "Cross-functional teams seem to be most effective in companies with fast-changing markets, such as the computer, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, and similar industries that value adaptability, speed, and an intense focus on responding to customer needs" (Parker 2003, 6). Parker noted that there is an expectation that cross-functioning teams have the potential of becoming more effective with less management intervention.

An example of an effective cross-functional team can be found in the McGinnis and Kemp article in which a number of staff got together to set up electronic resources in the Texas Tech Library for the first time (1998). The benefits of a cross-functional team were displayed

well in this team. The cross-functional team was able to act quickly and be flexible and responsive rather than normal functional groups that are slow and resistant to change. Cross-functional teams are more flexible and responsive, since the team has a wide perspective, and this allowed the team to make front-line decisions quickly.

Web Teams in Libraries

Authors Church and Felker noted that "members of early web groups offered diverse sets of opinions, they did not guarantee interested and able participants" (2005). Furthermore, the groups rarely had the authority to make changes. Additionally, the authors understood the importance of individuals having the skills and interest to participate. The authors stated that skills take a backseat to the person's interest - "in a choice between skills and interest, choose interest" (2005). Great concern was shown for the lack of a defined project scope and having goals set in stone for the web project. Simply adding the website responsibilities to an individual's work load "leads to stress, frustration, and burnout." The authors also understand the importance of the team having appropriate authority. For the team to be successful, they need "reasonable amount of authority to carry out the task…without running through the existing power structure" (2005). In the end, the product is what suffers.

Dethloff & German (2013), who wrote about the challenges of a usability committee, agreed that it is important for a committee member to be interested in the committee over the individual having experience or first-hand knowledge. A person chosen for the committee based on their passion for the topic rather than for their skillset does have its downsides, however, such as the need for extensive training. The training is necessary to get each committee member on the same page. Furthermore, the usability committee experienced the same thing many committees encounter - issues around consensus decision making. As noted, "every small step of

the process had to be vetted, argued, compromised and eventually agreed upon" (2013).This form of decision making lengthened the time required to complete a task to the detriment of the committee. Lastly, the committee members, in retrospect, experienced great frustration with having to maintain their current level of work and adding on the additional committee work.

Context and the development of library culture

Context is vital to understand problems with teams. To understand the creation of a frustrating web team in 2005, the previous ten years must also be looked at to understand the context of the culture of the organization. Cross-functional teams had been successfully implemented in the library since 1995 when the first web team formed itself as described in the Johnson article (1998). A group of interested parties with relevant skills from different parts of the library got together to create something that had never existed before, and needed to encompass many different parts of the library. In this case, a cross-functional team was a very effective team structure to create something new very quickly. The team formed itself, and disbanded within a few years. Though it was short-lived, it was a healthy and effective cross-functional team. After the team disbanded, the library administration decided there needed to be a team to maintain the website and develop it. A new team called the University Library Web Development Board (WDB) was created in 2002. At the same time, under a new dean, the library administration became a team known as the Senior Management Team (SMT). This new administration team was supposed to take on the qualities of teams that run things from the Katzenback & Smith article.

Little is known about the specifics of the meetings between the WDB and SMT, but what shows up in the meeting minutes is an undercurrent of problems and frustrations. Members of WDB and SMT who were contacted said they had tried to forget the team and that period of time

due to the contentious nature of the team. They also talked about people leaving the organization specifically because the stress of being on that team.

The team, and the library culture, was possibly caustic and the WDB was disbanded in 2005 after numerous attempts by administration to remedy the problems of the team by switching reporting lines. Once the WDB team was disbanded, SMT began writing the charter for a new website team. With the contentious nature of the last team on their minds, they wrote the new team charter to prevent some of the same problems from happening again. In the new team charter, it specifically referenced how the new team was completely separate from the old WDB team and that the new team would be a team that recommends things to SMT. The members of the team were to be selected by the dean of libraries.

The more things change, the more they stay the same

The newly formed Website Support Team (WSST) was formed in 2005 as a cross-functional team. Instead of creating something new, the team was charged with ongoing maintenance. From the teams in the Katzenback & Smith article, WSST was effectively created to have some elements of both teams that recommend things and teams that do things. This caused a lot of frustration with the team members as it was difficult to figure out what was the team's responsibility and what they needed to take to SMT. It is this dissonance between what the team was asked to do and what authority they had to do it that underpinned the teams ten year existence.

Unlike most cross-functional teams, this team was to be ongoing and membership would change every year with a few people leaving and a few people coming on. The team was set up in way that would later on cause difficulty as there was a learning curve for each new member,

and consensus was difficult to achieve. Members of the team found it difficult to reconcile the dual message of being in charge of maintenance, but also not being allowed to make their own decisions and instead having to submit nearly all changes to a group of people who were experienced administers and managers but not experts in web design or maintenance.

The WSST exceled at their maintenance tasks by developing and documenting guidelines, training, and procedures but found any drastic changes difficult to implement. These problems came to a head when WSST was asked to do a redesign of the whole website. This task proved so difficult and frustrating that the team minutes showed the team members added a relaxation time to beginning of all their weekly meetings to help deal with the stress (Website Support Team 2006). Short-term stress in the terms of a team may be acceptable, but the minutes for the combined SMT and WSST meeting that happened monthly showed that the stress levels never dropped and in fact may have gotten worse over time.

The process of the website redesign had heavy oversite from SMT, and in the combined minutes SMT encouraged WSST to cut the size of the project plan and complete the project sooner while also not compromising on quality. While this request is not uncommon form library administers (they often want things to be cheaper and faster without compromising quality), it's also an unreasonable request to expect someone to reduce both resources and schedule but maintain the same end result. In project management practice, the balance between project scope, time, and cost is described as triple constraint (Tsongas 2011). When one aspect of the triplet is changed, one or both of the other remaining has to change as well to accommodate it. In the minutes, WSST did not take their unreasonable marching orders easily. Increasing or keeping the scope the same while reducing resources and schedule causes problems with project completion. The WSST did fight back. Team members expressed concern about handling all the

different aspects of the redesign on their own while trying to address all of SMT's concerns. They expressed that in addition to dealing with the technical aspect of the new website, the project was made more complicated as they discovered 40 different content providers in the organization that would have to receive training and coordination on the move to the new site. These concerns were never addressed and so WSST marched forward toward potential failure. Despite this, because of hard work and dedication, the team didn't fail. They launched a well-designed website in 2008, however they were unprepared to deal with the backlash from the university's faculty who were frustrated by the sudden change.

In the minutes for the WSST meeting, WSST wanted, first and foremost, to be able to manage their resources (who was on the project, what they were doing) and to control project scope on their own instead of leaving the scope to be determined haphazardly by SMT. Also on their list was the need to push SMT further away from the process and let them focus more on the portfolio management (overall picture) rather than on the specifics of the website project. They argued that SMT often pushed for things to happen at the wrong time or pushed project scopes. When presented with these problems SMT held fast to their tight control of the project for fear of letting the same kinds of problems of the WDB team happen again. Authority, having been abused by another team, was not going to be granted to WSST.

It became clear that, while the new website itself worked, there were deeper problems with the way the library was organized that were being exposed by a website that worked. For example, there were no clear procedures on who needed to be contacted if there were certain kinds of problems. Different phone numbers were on different pages for the same problem. When WSST tried to explain to SMT that the problems were not website problems but rather organizational problems, tensions increased. The two teams had to establish ground rules such

as "this is not a blame session" to keep the meetings on track. Regardless of how the team moved forward, or whether or not they were successful, the very fact that such contentious meetings were happening should have been a sign that the whole relationship between WSST and SMT needed to be re-evaluated.

It's telling that between the redesign in 2009 and 2015, very little on the website changed besides a few links. The few major changes that were made (such as updating the search box or removing the tabs) came after long and arduous arguments and documentation. SMT was burned out and felt that making no decision was better than making the wrong decision. This was an incredibly frustrating time for each new cycle of WSST members as their suggestions and research often were considered but not implemented.

A Time for Recovery

After six years of slow change on the website, SMT decided they wanted to try having a single person responsible for the website instead of a team. In 2015, a new web librarian was hired and began the task of slowly updating the website. Instead of a cross-functional team, a new team was formed to act as an advisory committee to the new web librarian. This new advisory committee was not expected to make decisions or do maintenance task, but instead act as a sounding board for the Web Librarian, and to provide feedback on new changes and how they might affect different areas of the library. This advisory board was much larger than WSST, with a single person representing all the different departments or units of the library.

This method of having a central person with an advisory committee has been in place for one year, and has shown to have many significant advantages over the cross-functional team.

First of all, the problems of authority are fixed as the web librarian is responsible for changes and deciding when changes need to be brought up her reporting line.

The team does not report to SMT, but instead most problems are handled through the hierarchy of the web librarian and their supervisor or associate dean above them. Development on the website has become much faster and much more responsive as small changes can be made without having to reach consensus. A few people requesting changes have been shocked that changes happen the day they are suggested, or soon after. The web librarian is given a lot of autonomy, but with many chances for discussion and feedback. A test site has been made available to the library as a whole, and feedback from public facing staff and librarians is specifically sought out. While small changes are made as soon as possible, larger changes are left for times when the campus is mostly empty and students and faculty are not actively using the site (such as after finals in December or May), which reduces the shock factor of changes.

Lessons Learned

People on teams must have relevant skills for the team

It's not that everyone has to have technical skills, but if there is going to be a task assigned to a team, then members of the team need the skill set to handle the team's duties. In the WSST's case, people were assigned who had no context of website needs or any website development skills. This created a steep learning curve for at least one person annually, thus time was required to bring new members up to speed. These people were often put on the team specifically because they did not have experience or knowledge in order to raise awareness about the website throughout the organization. This strategy only hampered the team. These people, lacking their own skills, often created work for others and slowed down task completion. These

new members were also not encouraged to go in depth with their understanding since, after they left the team, website support would no longer be a part of their job.

The solution is simple. Only add people to a team if there is a clear skill or knowledge set they possess. Identify why they are on the team and make it clear to them. Make it clear to them that if they feel they cannot meet the team's needs (because they do not have the skill set, interest, or time), they may exit and other more appropriate team members can be sought.

Teams need to be given explicit authority and some autonomy

Teams need the authority to perform the work assigned. WSST could not get the resources they needed because they had no authority. Autonomy is also important, where the team is given a few guidelines in order to make decisions themselves and only seek guidance when decisions are outside the established boundaries. WSST was required to take most issues and decisions to SMT. A separate team was tasked with making another team's decisions for them. This led to delays in task completion and frustration on the part of the team members.

The solution to this problem is to identify in what circumstances the team can go ahead and make an informed decision and, more importantly, to trust the team to make proper and informed decisions. Why else would a group of knowledgeable and skillful people be brought together if not to make use of their knowledge and skills? Administration should define a set of criteria for problems that need to be vetted at a higher level. The criteria should be very clear, simple, and understandable. A common guideline is to set a dollar amount above which administration needs to be involved, or mark a level of impact that would require administrative oversight, such as changes that effect the public versus changes that only effect staff.

Teams should be created with a clear purpose

Team members should know why their team was created, and they should have specific tasks or objectives. If the team is a cross-functional team that is created to complete a task, then the whole team needs to know when their task is over and what their goal is. The only way to prevent scope creep is to allow the team to control their scope. Administration should let teams know that they have the right to defend their scope. When managing a team, the goals of library administration should be made clear.

If a team is supposed to be ongoing and maintain something, then consider not creating a cross-functional team that is in charge of it. Instead, the authors suggest putting a person or a functional team in charge of the maintenance, and have an advisory committee set up for them. This provides all the benefits of using a functional team, and some of the benefits of using a cross-functional team without the problems.

Even if a team is effective, it may be caustic to an organization

The WDB and WSST were effective teams overall, but a number of people from these teams ended up leaving the organization while on the team or not long after rolling off the team. The website tasks were completed but at the cost of employee satisfaction. The authors recommend that library upper administrations keep track of the number of employees that leave the organization after having been on particular teams. During their exit interviews, these employees should be asked if their membership in a particular team contributed to their leaving. A relatively high turnover rate related to a particular team (or objective) may be an indication of a hostile work environment created by the team itself or the situations that the team is put under.

Recognize when a cross-functional team is having problems and intervene

If administrators notice that a team is less effective than it used to be, or seems to be cautious, these might be indications that the team is having problems. Obvious signs of stress or frustration are signals that a different approach should be taken. Seeing these signs can be difficult for administrators, as people will try to keep up appearances for those with authority, so administrators need to keep a close-eye for signs of burn-out. As shown by the example, sometimes a cross-functional team will show signs of problems in their minutes, or in how they work with administration.

Conclusion

Despite having a few cross-functional teams early on, the Texas Tech University Libraries created two effective but caustic cross-functional teams to manage the Library website, causing the website to be an area of contention and staff burnout from 2002 to 2015. While cross-functional teams have the potential to move quickly on tasks and get things done, they also come with unique challenges to administration. One of these challenges is developing reporting lines outside of normal reporting lines for functional library teams, and another is identifying when cross-functional teams are having problems. If administrators create cross-functional teams with the right people and a clear purpose, then giving them the authority they need to function should not be a problem.

Cross-functional teams are not always the best team structure to deal with certain kinds of problems. While cross-functional teams are good at creating new things or responding to complicated problems very quickly, they are not as effective at maintaining things that have already been created. For long term maintenance, the authors recommend putting a single person in charge of the tasks or a functional team. If the long term maintenance task requires input from

many different areas of the library, consider creating an advisory committee to give feedback on possible changes.

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