

New Ways to Achieve Quality and Improvement

BY BRIAN W. MILLER

AISC Certification adopts a team approach.

THE CERTIFICATION GROUP AT AISC has begun implementing an organizational change that will result in us working a little differently than we have in the past. AISC and Quality Management Company (QMC) personnel are in the process of transitioning from a traditional hierarchical management structure to working as a self-directed work team (SDWT). This new way of doing business requires some adjustment, but we believe it will allow us to unleash our potential and more effectively engage limited resources.

Why the Change?

The trigger for the transition to a team-based organization was Bobbi Marsteller's announcement to leave AISC to pursue other interests. As the AISC vice president overseeing Certification, Bobbi contributed remarkable talent, leadership, and energy that will be difficult to replace. The Certification program is growing rapidly, with new standards being developed and program participation growing at an annual rate of greater than 10%. The SDWT approach provides a way for the Certification group to continue functioning effectively while avoiding the disruption of an executive search and hiring process.

A Good Fit

The SDWT is defined as "a group of people with complementary skills, working together in their own ways toward a common purpose, performance goals, and approach, which the team defines and to which they hold themselves mutually accountable." This approach is expected to minimize administrative disruption and enable Certification staff to stay focused on the tasks at hand and make progress toward established goals. The loss of a key individual presented a challenge, but objectives and goals are well understood and the group works well together, openly offering and soliciting one another's talent and creativity to accomplish the job that needs to be done. The SDWT concept stood out as an ideal solution to pursue—one that fits the group and our needs.

Implementation

Transitioning to a team-based organization from a traditional management structure is challenging. It requires new ways of thinking and making the decision to unleash self-actualization and creativity. It also requires an organization to establish operational ground rules and define processes. Adjustment from both the team itself and those working with the team from the outside is required. Fortunately, good team development resources, such as *The Magic*

of Self Directed Work Teams: A Case Study in Courage and Cultural Change by Paul C. Palmes, are available that improve awareness about the inherent risks and help with the transition process. Four stages are widely accepted as a bumpy but normal part of the team development process:

- **Forming.** Team members wrestle with excitement, anticipation, and anxiety in the process of establishing basic team rules and decision-making processes.
- **Storming.** The team development process involves work and adjustments that, to team members, may seem slow and in competition with day-to-day tasks.
- **Norming.** Team members gain acceptance of ground rules and their roles in the team, focusing increasingly on team cohesion and goals.
- **Performing.** Team members have adjusted to the team structure, expectations, and relationships and have become confident in their ability to address challenges and chart and accomplish team goals.

How's it Going?

We are still very early in the transition process, but making very strong progress. When we first started, the team-based concept seemed new and unfamiliar to many of us. As we progressed, however, it became rapidly and increasingly clear that we had been preparing for this for a long time and that the team approach is a natural approach to engaging all of the group's resources. The Team already has top leadership support, a high level of people equity, and a quality culture—three criteria identified in research as critical for successful application of quality initiatives and for successfully managing resources and business processes (J.T. Kostman and W.A. Schlemann, "People Equity: The Hidden Driver of Quality," *Quality Progress*, May 2005).

The Certification group has the full support of top management at AISC in making the transition to a SDWT, reporting directly to AISC's president. It also already possesses a high degree of people equity. Bobbi Marsteller concentrated first on "who" then on "what," often citing management consultant Jim Collins, who advocates for "getting the right people on the bus." Objective hiring and firing decisions have been based on organizational goals, and careful attention to regular, meaningful employee reviews has yielded a capable and engaged workforce and aligned individual and organizational goals.

Certification group members have worked individually and as a group to identify and cultivate individual strengths through con-

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tinuing education and professional development opportunities. AISC has provided team members access to a self-assessment tool that helps them gain a better understanding of their natural behavior and how it affects their work style (Managing for Success, Renaissance Executive Forums, Target Training International, Ltd.). Complementary talents and skills naturally emerge, which leads to group-strengthening synergies and sharing responsibility for specific tasks.

As for quality culture, this comes naturally to the team through continuous immersion in the AISC Certification Program and through QMC's ISO 9001 registered quality management system. AISC and QMC staff meet regularly, either in person or online, to review and evaluate progress toward accomplishing organizational goals. Commitment to continual improvement, focus on customer feedback, goal setting, process definition, review of performance measures and non-conformances, internal auditing, and management reviews are simply the way we do business.

A quality culture has taught us to trust the process in order to achieve results. It draws attention beyond resources alone to the processes that connect the resources: inputs, outputs, methods, and communication. Process is where the action is, where the measurable results occur. We plan for, and then expect, the best possible outcome, recognizing that failure comes only in neglecting to apply what we learn when an objective is not fully achieved.

Expected Achievements

By adopting a team approach, AISC Certification expects to maximize effectiveness in serving clients and users of our Certification programs and to unlock the full potential of our people and the equity philosophy of the group. Our quality focus and the strong, dynamic connections we will develop as a SDWT will position us well for the future and for new challenges that are sure to come along.

We also expect to learn a great deal in this process and look forward to sharing our experiences as a SDWT with our colleagues in other AISC divisions and with individuals in the steel construction. You might also consider the SDWT concept for your own operation. Please feel free to inquire about our progress or share your thoughts by e-mailing certinfo@aisc.org or calling 312.670.7520. MSC

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