Is Your Organization Really Flat and What Does That Mean?

Recently I was asked about the idea of ‘flat organizations’ and, specifically, how to explain and manage the workflow and structure to new employees. For some employees the idea of a flat organization is exciting but for others confusion and concern are common reactions. Clearly understanding the definition and implications of a flat organization can help you explain and manage it successful in your workplace.

Pros and Cons of a Flat Organizational Structure

The structure of an organization relates primarily to the relationships between employees. Within organizations there are often many layers of relationships that span across, above and below. However, in a flat organization there are far fewer layers. Many small organizations, departments and teams operate successfully with a flat structure even within the structure of a larger, hierarchical structure.

A ‘Flat’ organizational structure involves the idea that employees have more direct access to leadership, information and the opportunity to contribute to ideas, suggestions and decisions. The traditional ‘middle’ managers may be eliminated or may simply occupy a different place and role. Flat organizations have a loose reporting structure and provide employees with more autonomy in terms of accomplishing work, managing projects and building their teams.

The advantages of flat organizations can include a more responsive and agile workforce as fewer layers of reporting enable more ability for those doing the work to impact the decision-making and implementations of activities tied to delivering the work. Employees in a flat organization may have more access to one another and there may be more opportunities to collaborate, respond, and make changes.

The disadvantage of a flat organization can include employees who become lost and overwhelmed as a result of less support, mistakes or errors may slip through the cracks when there are fewer checks and balances. Additionally there can to be less opportunity for employee movement and promotion resulting in less motivation to work hard to advance ones career.

How Can You Explain The Flat Organization Structure?

When speaking to employees about a flat organizational structure it is useful to explain that there remain layers of communication, relationships and

responsibilities. You want to avoid the impression that employees have free reign to do things they way they want, without oversight, that there are fewer people to back them up. An individual employee in a flat structure means they often need to spend more time managing their own work.

When creating structure in a flat organization keep these 3 tips in mind

- ***Create communication expectations:*** Although employees may have easier access to everyone including leadership this does not mean that everyone will be or needs to be informed. Employees need to have a picture of communication expectations and process. The dangers of a flat organization include both too much sharing of information to too many people and to little information shared with to few people

- ***Establish a clear collaborative process:*** Informing employees of how to navigate the process of collaboration can help minimize miscommunications and over communications. Identify places for both informal and formal collaborations to occur including physical and electronic spaces. Schedule times for formal and informal collaborations and ensure everyone knows times and locations. More social employees may naturally migrate to physical collaborative spaces whereas other more introverted ones may migrate to electronic spaces. Create a process that connects the two and actively invite employees to participate.
- ***Clarify responsibilities and ownership:*** Without a clear 'chain of command' it is more important to ensure everyone communicates who owns and is responsible for what aspects of a project or work task. Assigning coordination and oversight is important to ensure projects stay on track. Create checks and balances that involve individuals identifying ownership publically for the purpose of accountability. Post information about tasks and task ownership, time-lines, and who is involved can be a useful way to ensure work is accomplished efficiently.

A flat structure does not mean there are no chains of command, no reporting or no structure it means there are fewer layers and barriers to communication. Clarifying what you mean by flat and how flat works within your organization are important steps in making a Flat team, department or organization work for you.