



Interviewed by Alan Slobodnik

Elizabeth Haight is Vice President for Operations at The MathWorks in Natick, MA. She has used our FasTeams[®] program to facilitate the company's recent shift to a cross-functional team structure.

Q. Thanks for agreeing to discuss the challenges and issues of going to a team based culture. First of all, why go to teams? What were the problems that you were experiencing that made you start thinking in terms of teams?

A. Everybody was operating as his or her own unit. They tended not to ask for assistance, felt that this was their territory and they were responsible for it-although they tended to be six weeks behind. In Operations, it was taking us seven to ten days to get orders turned around because of all the steps in the process and each person only seeing a little step. The problem we had was that being behind became the norm. And that started to be widely accepted. We felt that opening up to teams really opened up the focus.

Q. How did you get the courage to do it? How did you sell it to other people?

A. In 1993 the president wanted to de-hassle the company. The Operations area was voted the biggest hassle at The MathWorks. It was not something I was proud of, but it was a challenge. I pulled the management group together and sent them out to flow chart the processes in other people's areas. Then we sat down and we tried to reinvent the processes.

The little changes weren't working, so it had to be something drastic. We put together a proposal, went to the executive group with it and explained what we wanted to do. Luckily they bought into it.

Q. Was there any resistance that you encountered?

A. We obviously had to try something and they were willing to take the risk. The worst that could happen is we could easily fall back into the old organizational structure.

So, we decided it was going to happen on a Monday. On Friday I called the whole group together and explained the plan, what the new structure was, what their job title was, where they would sit, how what they did was going to change, and how we were going to do it. We committed that the management team, for the first month, would be a triage unit. They'd be in the hallway and if anybody came and tried to get you to do it the old way, you'd just pass that off. We took away all the backlog from them so they had no excuse for falling back.

Q. It was delivered to them on a Friday and it was implemented on a Monday? What a bold move.

A. Yes, well, I did it because I knew the management team had the trust of the employees. They did ask questions, but I think there was a sense of relief. They had a lot of pressure on them. They knew it was broken and they didn't know how to fix it. And I think at that point the pain was so great they were willing to try anything.

Q. A lot of this was driven by a sense of urgency. That's always a great motivator.

A. It was the biggest motivator. And I think you also have to have history with people so that they know that you're not going to lead them into a disaster.

Q. And you really provided them support. You did the triage thing for the first month.

A. Yes, we were physically in the halls. The managers had a lot of fun with it. For the people, it was a joy to be able to pass their work to us. We took away all the obstacles that they could use as excuses to fall back. And we did have a number of people on special projects for a period of time to get through all the backlog but we made sure it didn't slowly creep back on to them. And we pulled it off. Within 30 days we were shipping in 24 hours.

Q. What a story. I love, too, that you built in a mirror function. You said, whenever someone tries to get you to go back to doing it the old way, come and see us. So, you're getting them to observe their own process and be participants in that. They may not have had a lot of advance warning, but you gave them 100% support and backup in their efforts to be mirrors to themselves.

A. In looking back, the triage part is probably the most important thing we did for them. We were really there with them. We were trying to help them be successful. And I think they enjoyed that. They were proud of it.

Q. Now did all of Operations then become completely team based? How many people are we talking about?

A. There were probably forty people at that time, in six teams. Yes, all of Operations became team based at that point. The great part about it in the end is, it was Operations that was failing, and it was Operations that then succeeded. There was no particular group; everybody did it together. And they were recognized that way. There was no particular person recognized.

Q. What you did have going for you is you had 100% buy-in on everybody's part because of that sense of urgency.

A. Right. And the management group developed the plan collaboratively. It wasn't one person's idea. We all had ideas and they were all melded together to come up with what we ended up with. That was important. I couldn't have pushed this on anybody. And even though I had proposed the first idea, I hit a few walls with my own staff because of surprising them with it. But, we sat down and we continued to rework it. We kept redoing the organizational structure and process flow with Post-it's on the wall. Then I finally took them out for a three hour lunch, and they agreed to the whole thing.

Q. Would you do things differently if you were starting from the beginning?

A. Well, the one thing I would do again is do it just like that-overnight. I mean, make sure you put enough planning into putting it up overnight. But you can't make long term change happen slowly. If it really is drastic, don't try to make believe it's something else. Just be honest with people and tell them up front.

Q. And you made quite clear that not going along was not an option. That's what they're going to do. That's the culture, that's what you're standing for, and they have to figure out how to do it. But the expectation that they have to do it is very, very clear. And that was part of the weekend coup. When was that done?

A. Two years ago this summer. And now everybody has input. Everybody's on cross-functional teams, making decisions on running the company. They're not all going to somebody else to make the decisions.

Q. The thing that's great about your story, Elizabeth, is the dramatic decrease in cycle time, and the fact that that's been sustainable. I'm assuming that you haven't gone back to seven to ten day shipment?

A. Still 24 hours, and as a matter of fact, most of it now is the same day.

Q. From a business standpoint that's unbelievable, for that to be sustainable. And I'm assuming as well that you're continuing to get more efficient in terms of doing more with the same amount of resources. So, when you really look at it, there's even a more dramatic increase in the results.

A. There has been. And now all the teams keep their own metrics. "How can we get better? How can we push the productivity? How can we change the processes?" So this way everybody is learning about process redesign and how that can make a difference.

Q. What would the average employee say about the change over the last couple of years?

A. I think the average employee would say it has helped Operations be successful. I think they feel successful being part of Operations. I think they feel much more involved in the business, in what's going on-maybe to the point where they know almost too much because they feel pressured by the level of responsibility they have. I would say that a good majority of them would say that the most difficult thing is learning to work with peers in a cooperative way.

Q. If they could take a vote, how many would choose to go back to the old way?

A. I would say fewer than 10%.

Q. So, there's more responsibility, but also more empowerment and ownership. You think they'd vote to keep the team structure?

A. Well you know how you get those families that are doing nothing but fighting with each other? They love it, but they complain about it all the time? That's sort of the way we operate. They sometimes struggle with the team process and the personalities may drive them crazy. But at the same time, they'd probably jump in front of a truck for that person because it's their teammate.