How we can benefit your executive team.

Resolving goal conflicts

The background

A mid-sized pharmaceutical company was struggling with conflicts being waged on the level below the executive.

Metaplan's assignment

Metaplan's job was to help the people involved to reach agreement.

Our approach

Our analysis revealed that the conflict was not being caused by the individuals themselves, but stemmed from the tasks the organization had assigned to them. We therefore initiated workshops for the purpose of exposing goal conflicts and their underlying reasons in the organization itself. Working with the players, we clarified each business area's goals and identified the source of the tension between them.

It became apparent that each department was attempting to achieve its own goal by interfering in the work of the others. In the hope of achieving fast delivery of important materials, Production had made direct contact with strategic suppliers, but that fell under the purview of Purchasing. Meanwhile, to achieve better prices, Purchasing consolidated orders for goods that Production needed on short notice. This slowed down delivery. The goal conflict was aggravated by the constantly changing sales forecasts issued by the sales department. Time after time, the company's subsidiaries received less merchandise than they had originally ordered. So, as a precaution, they ordered more than they needed. Production, in turn, had to plan extra shifts to supply the most important markets. The moment a delivery quantity was confirmed, the sales forecast would be revised downward on short notice. On the production and supply side, this led to renewed disruption, and the whole cycle started again.

Using the most important product group as an example, and working in collaboration with the board and department heads, we precisely laid out the allocation of tasks to the various departments, and their associated goals. This included finding out under what circumstances they communicated on concrete issues, as well as finding ways to do justice to the interests and rationales of the individual departments. Drawing on the specific solutions developed for the most important production group, we formulated general policies for managing goal conflicts productively.

The results

By redefining goals and tasks, we identified areas where individual departments were exceeding their authority. Our discussions with the players enabled us to expose the goal conflicts this had created. We first arranged a meeting structure for one product group and determined topics for clarification, both ad hoc and on a weekly, monthly, and quarterly basis. On the one hand, this identified goal conflicts as part of the process of assigning tasks. On the other, the meeting-based structure established a mechanism for managing those conflicts. Once the issues underlying a conflict had been defined, players could avoid attributing them to other individuals. By making group-specific adjustments, we were ultimately able to transfer what worked for the most important product group to all the other groups.

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