

30 November 2023

Huddles



Dennis Sandow, President of Reflexus Company



Cat Heyn, Senior Director, Operations + Strategic Projects for Hyphn

Aim of blog

In this month's blog I am grateful to collaborate with my co-author, Cat Heyn, Senior Director, Operations + Strategic Projects for Hyphn. The purpose of this blog is to explain how team huddles result in high performance and social wellbeing. The blog is inspired by the operations team at Hyphn with special thanks to Kami Abraugh, Hyphn's Installation and Dispatch Manager and the installation and service crew. (You folks you nailed it!)

The history of quality circles

In post war Japan, the Japanese Union of Scientists and Engineers (JUSE) formed in 1946 to support the rapid development of society. Dr WE Deming supported JUSE and lectured

extensively in Japan on his theory of statistical quality control and continuous quality improvement. His lectures inspired Kaoru Ishikawa, the Chief Executive Director of Quality Circles for JUSE, who launched the first quality circle in Japan in 1962. This bottoms-up approach to quality improvement rapidly spread across Japan and around the world.

A quality circle is a small group of front-line workers who according to JUSE, operate autonomously, use quality control concepts and improvement tools, encourage workers' creativity, and promote individual and group development. The purpose of the quality circle is to develop workers' capabilities, create workplace wellbeing by respecting our human nature, and to improve customer satisfaction. Quality circles are essential in creating a culture of worker development and organizational learning.

Later in his career, Dr Deming described managements' responsibility for establishing a development culture.

Encourage communication. Make physical arrangements for informal dialog between people in the various components of the company, regardless of level of position. Encourage continual learning and advancement. [1]

Establishing quality circles is a win-win strategy for business. In my [26 May 2023 blog](#) I described one of my first social action research studies in 1993, showing how the establishment of a quality circle approach benefitted business. My baseline data revealed

the absence of a bottoms-up approach to quality improvement quality circles are known for. Working on the assembly line, I established a quality circle, empowering workers to study and improve the quality of the product they were building. The workers quickly solved a reoccurring quality problem. This created a financial benefit to the company, and accounting for the labor costs of participating in the quality circle, my financial analysis concluded that for every dollar spent on workers time spent in the quality circle, the company received a return of \$17.42. The Chief Financial Officer for the company studied my findings and concluded “the actual savings seem to be substantially understated and therefore the monetary impact of the project understated.” [2]

While this demonstrated the financial impact of quality circles, what could account for the rapid growth around the world and throughout Japan? The answer from Ishikawa was short and sweet – “Circles work because they appeal to the democratic nature of humankind. ‘Wherever they are, human beings are human beings.’”

Cat Heyn and I expand on this theme in our case study of Hyphn’s huddles, the company’s unique approach to establishing quality circles, as we show how this bottom-up approach to quality improvement also results in individual and group wellbeing.

Hyphn, Portland, Oregon

Hyphn's mission statement.

At Hyphn, we enhance our community's potential one workspace at a time. Using research, data, and experience, together we design and deliver inspiring workplace solutions that enable you to do your best, feel your best, and achieve your best.

And how do they inspire workplace solutions? By bringing their core values to work!

1. WE'RE ONE TEAM

We're Better Together. Our best results are not created by a lone team member, but by a well practiced and aligned team - one team, one dream! When we're inspired to seek a fresh perspective or view our task through a teammate's lens, everyone wins. We harness the power of team to push each other to grow, to hold each other accountable, and to pick each other up, reminding each other that **we're better together.**

2. WE'VE GOT YOU

We're Partnered for Success. Bring us the most complex or delicate project you have, and we'll collectively say, "on it." We serve and advise our clients with expertise, proactiveness, integrity, and creativity. Together, we all rally around the notion that we're not satisfied until our clients are taken care of. And when our clients hop on a call or walk through our doors, they can truly feel that **we're partnered for success.**

3. WE NEVER SETTLE

Success Doesn't Stand Still. What we offer has evolved far beyond our industry's benchmarks —we're our clients' strategists, advisors, and consultants on all things space. And we're not done. We believe in challenging ourselves, taking risks, innovating, breaking molds and failing forward everyday. We will never stop learning, growing and getting better, because we know **success doesn't stand still.**

4. WE LOVE TO LAUGH

Bring the Fun (Bucket) to Work. Work shouldn't be a drag, life is too short. It's one of our greatest points of pride that we can bring our whole selves to work, our curiosity, belly laughs, goofy energy, and a sprinkle of self-deprecation (all in good fun of course). Work can be hard, deadlines can be stressful, patience can run short, but don't worry we can count on each other to keep perspective and **bring the fun (bucket) to work.**

5. WE BUILD COMMUNITY

We Make a Difference. Our mission is to improve the world one workspace at a time, but it's our values that empower us to make a much broader impact in our communities. We are here to support each other, protect our environment, and help out our neighbors. We are impelled to give of our time, energy, and resources to improve the world we are a part of, knowing **we make a difference.**

Every morning at 7AM Hyphn's installation and service team meet for 10-15 minutes. Kami, Hyphn's Installation and Dispatch manager, facilitates the huddle by reviewing the previous day's work performance and planning the current day's work with the team. The aim of her facilitation is to build team morale by creating a safe space for the team. Cat Heyn, Kami's boss, brought the practice to the team and still leads huddles from time to time.

Preparing for this blog, Cat and I spoke about the Operations team's huddle, and I found her insights to be inspirational.

1. The importance of a daily routine

"The value of routine is really important in how we set each day with intention. I think that you could easily say, 'Oh, you could get this information out of the way.' It could be an email, a phone call, or a text message. But the fact that there's a ritual around huddles is really important."

2. Teammates connecting with each other

"It was surprising to learn was just how important it was for the team to see their other teammates every day and to start the day together. They all are going to go out to do different jobs of the same nature. And I think they felt really separate before, and now they feel a lot more connected. I think just the fact that they're together, do the same work and they have the chance to struggle through the same challenges connects them."

Realizing you're not alone in that is a big part of wellbeing and to hear other people share the challenge or a struggle is helpful. It's unifying.”

3. Fostering a culture of collaboration

“By focusing on the value, they create they improve their performance. The huddle conversations are not one way or top down. These are two-way conversations that allow them to advocate for helping each other and improve their job performance.”

4. Focus on value creation

“It's important the huddle leader recognizes the value teammates bring to work. It's, not about doing what the boss wants you to do. Instead, the focus is on what value you and your team create. Huddles are the place where feedback is given and received, and it makes it a lot easier to tackle other topics without having a big dramatic to do about it.”

5. A culture of wellbeing

“The huddles don't make every single initiative feel like a big deal. People get tired of that, and it wears on them. Huddles make it feel like every day I just did something a little bit better than the day before. That's a totally different vibe than it is when we're having grandiose rollouts, because all that does is indicate that there is a problem, people went away and figured out how to make you better, and now they're going to

tell you how to do that. Nobody loves that. So, at the huddles teammates get a voice in business performance.”

6. Accountability

“Huddles are the place for accountability - group accountability. It's not individual accountability, which is important because I think all people want, at the end of the day, is fairness. They want to know that they're being held accountable in a same way as their peers.”

Huddles and hubs.

“It is beneficial for crews to meet face to face to discuss progress and plan for the remainder of the shift. Structural resources working along Highway 126 have been using the outdoor space at the Obsidian Grill as a hub.” – Official public information



Fighting the Lookout fire in Oregon

What is a huddle?

Organizations hold meetings to take decisions, convey information, and, to manage change. A huddle is quite different and occurs when a small group of team members routinely meet to review and celebrate the previous days' performance and *coordinate their actions* for the new days' work. Huddles are

organizational learning in action and core to individual and group development and performance.

What is a hub?

Huddles are routine and happen in the same space every time they meet. The hub is a physical space that allows every team member to be seen and heard by all other team members.



Whiteaker block party

How do huddles work?

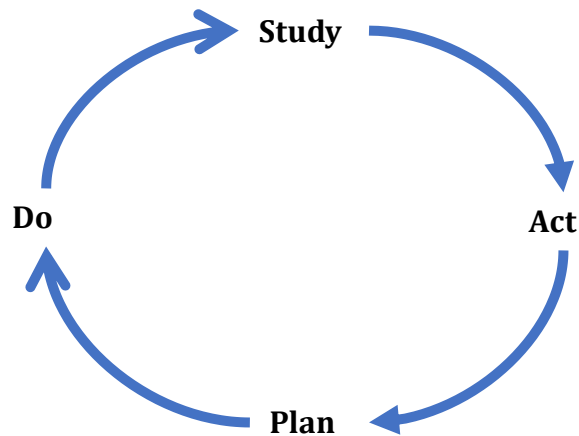
Huddles are held on a regular basis in the same space usually at the beginning of work. Unlike other meetings, huddles are short, lasting 10-15 minutes. The facilitator begins by reviewing the performance of team members since their last huddle and concludes with planning the day's work that lies ahead. By reviewing team performance, a positive culture is created, one that recognizes team members for their contributions – a powerful reward that improves

productivity and wellbeing. By planning the day's work, the team members are aligned and coordinated in their collective actions.

Huddles and continuous quality improvement

Like Ishikawa's quality circles, huddles are the how the organization practices continuous quality improvement, also known as the plan, do, study, act cycle [1, 3].

Starting the huddle by reviewing the team's performance from the previous day, is the *study phase* of the quality improvement cycle. The *act phase* of the cycle occurs when team members apply what they have learned



to their *plan* for the days' work and the *do phase* of the cycle occurs during the workday.

Because huddles are the organizations continuous quality improvement cycle, they eliminate waste, reduce costs, and improve productivity. Because workers are recognized for their value creation huddles create job satisfaction and wellbeing at work.

Who should participate in huddles?

It is hard to imagine a workplace without teams or collaboration. It is our human nature to collaborate and create value together. Keeping this in mind, the daily ritual of huddles as designed and practiced by Hyphn's operation team are valuable in all organization functions including administration, human resources, sales, engineering, and production. The reason for this is the power of connection and social cohesion fostered in the daily huddle routine.

Things to keep in mind in managing huddles.

1. Written notes improve the huddle and are an important reference for the facilitator, reminding team members of their collective tasks.
2. Even the best facilitators miss a day or two. For this reason, it's a good idea for all members to practice facilitation with a rotating responsibility on a daily or weekly basis. This also results in equity in the huddle process.
3. Data brings clarity and consistency to the huddle. For example, if bank employees huddle to improve their performance they might discuss how important it is to increase bank deposits. Having a daily record of how many dollars have been deposited give team members an objective measure. Data is like language and will improve coordinated actions, especially when it is timely, actionable, relevant, and accessible.

Leadership lessons

1. Daily huddles are the space where the values of the organization are aligned with leadership practices.
2. Employees are often promoted for their skills and productivity. Once promoted, the new leaders focus is no longer on their own productivity but the productivity of the group – those they supervise. When daily huddles boost team morale, recognize employees for

their contribution, and support team members group productivity or social capital improves.

3. Daily huddles using data-based decisions are crucial for leadership development. Top-down decisions based on authority are one directional and demand obedience, regardless of the outcome or value to the organization. Huddles using data to make decisions recognize that when all employees participating in decision making, productivity and innovation improve.
4. Huddles create wellbeing at work. Knowing that you are creating value at work feels good and doing so with your teammates feels even better. Having huddles as a daily ritual, fosters wellbeing because they recognize the value teammates are creating. The shared data-based decision making creates equity, inclusion and job satisfaction while improving individual and group confidence in the power of collaboration.

Research has shown that workplace cultures that do not recognize and reward workers for the value they create, do not foster workers support, and micro-manage workers increase the likelihood of heart disease and ill-mental health [4]. These adverse impacts on worker health can be avoided by instituting huddles on a regular basis. This is why quality circles and huddles are timeless. They are aligned with our human nature and our preferences to live and work well together. As Ishikawa pointed out, “Wherever they are, human beings are human beings.”

Citations

1. Deming, W.E., *The New Economics*. 1993, Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology. 240.
2. Eckerdt, A., *Action Research: Emphasis on Human Investment in the Private Sector*. 1995, EDPM 607, University of Oregon.
3. Deming, W.E., *Out of the Crisis*. 1986, Boston, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
4. Public and Commercial Services Union, *Work stress and health: the Whitehall II study*. 2004, Council of Civil Service Unions/Cabinet Office: London.