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WORKING PAPER SERIES

## **Real Teams in Small Australian Firms**

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## **Real Teams in Small Australian Firms**

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# **Real Teams in Small Australian Firms**

## **ABSTRACT**

This article describes the methodology and findings of four case studies conducted to explore the practice of teamwork in small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). The case studies were developed from interviews conducted to answer key issues. Results from the study indicate that in small firms effective teams can emerge without the need for team development interventions – in fact emergent teams or informal teams may well be more successful than those constructed through management intervention.

## **KEY WORDS**

*Leadership, teamwork, small and medium sized enterprises*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Small firms dominate the Australian economy. In many small firms teams have been implemented in an attempt to improve organisation performance, to keep up with contemporary management practice and to improve employee satisfaction and commitment. Many researchers and business leaders have argued that teamwork provides a means of harnessing the energy and creativity of employees (Schein 1988; Senge 1992; Orsburn et al 1990). Models of the organisation of the future described in much of the management literature are premised on teams surpassing individuals as the primary performance unit in the company (Katzenbach & Smith 1993; Belbin 1996; Dunphy & Griffiths 1998).

It is argued that a theoretical framework, which sets out the required elements and the optimal processes for team implementation, is important (Belbin 1993; Katzenbach & Smith 1993) but the complexity and diversity of organisations inevitably means that one model cannot be appropriate for all. As Sheard and Kakabadse (2002) observe, every organisational form has distinct strengths and distinct limitations. A team-based philosophy within an organisation can provide an effectively productive environment (Sheard & Kakabadse 2002). However, a formal approach to team development may not necessarily result in the best outcome, especially in small firms where sound leadership, common goals, trust and open

communication may already exist. In particular, trust, resulting from leadership actions, has been found to be a critical part of an effective team climate (Webber 2002).

The team concept emphasized in the literature on teams is relatively theoretical and can require resources and time not available to small firms. Research by Clifford and Sohal (1998) found that of the 30 Australian companies they surveyed 80% supported teamwork but none had passed the semi-autonomous stage of teamwork.

Small firms were selected for this study because they dominate the Australian economy. It is estimated that there were 1,233,200 private sector small businesses (employing up to 20 people) in Australia during 2000-01 which represented 97% of all private sector businesses (ABS 2003). These small businesses employed almost 3.6 million people, 49% of all private sector employment. Small businesses have particular constraints which influence their managerial style. They tend to be independently owned and operated, are managed by way of close control by owner/managers who also contribute most of the operating capital and the principal decision making is in the hands of owner/managers.

The paper begins with a description of the methodology employed, largely based on a case study protocol. The presentation of the case studies centers around a brief background of each company, a description of the owner/manager's leadership style, and an analysis of the team implementation and development in each case. The paper concludes with a discussion of overall findings.

## **Methodology**

A case study is a research strategy used when trying to explain rather than quantify phenomena (Yin 1989). Multiple case studies were selected for this study as this approach has been described as being similar to replication or executing multiple experiments.

A number of companies were contacted from among the respondents of an earlier survey who had indicated their willingness to participate in the case study research. After several telephone discussions four small organisations located in the western region of Melbourne were selected for the study. Their details are presented in Table 1 (with the company names disguised to preserve their anonymity). The case studies represent four industries – marketing, mining, non-residential care services and light manufacturing.

**Table I: Case Companies’ main characteristics**

<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Industry</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Size: No of Employees</b>
Marketing Co	Marketing and Business Management Services	Kensington	14
Quarry Co	Construction Material Mining	Melton	49
Care Co	Non-Residential Care Services	Werribee	3
Manufacturing Co	Machinery and Equipment Manufacturing	Braybrook	27

Forty-three interviews were conducted, representing 47% of all personnel at the case study sites (See Table II). The interviews were conducted over 40 to 60 minutes and all were audiotaped and transcribed.

**Table II: Number of Interviewees from each Organisation and in Total**

	<b>Marketing Co</b>	<b>Quarry Co</b>	<b>Care Co</b>	<b>Manufacturing Co</b>	<b>Total</b>
Number of Employees	14	48	3	27	92
Number of interviewees	8	19	3	13	43

The interviews consisted of three parts. Respondents were asked about their roles, their participation in teamwork and the impact of teamwork on organisational capability. When discussing teamwork interviewees were asked to comment on team empowerment and autonomy, rewards, feelings of accomplishment, levels of trust, team maturity, training and

development, goal setting and achievement and feelings of belonging. They were also questioned about the organisation's leadership, strategy, structure, culture and communication processes.

The data was analysed using Miles and Huberman's (1994) method of arraying data on a matrix using coding from each set of case data.

The large number of interviews conducted added to the construct validity of the cases by providing multiple measures of the same phenomenon (Yin 1989). When each case was completed it was read by key informants for corroboration.

## **Case Study 1: Marketing Co**

### *Background*

Marketing Co had operations in Melbourne and in Sydney employing 16 full-time staff and many additional casual staff at peak times. The company specialised in distributing travel brochures to travel agents. Four teams were functionally defined being responsible for administration, initial distribution, top ups and dispatch. Aside from administration the skills required for each task were minimal and could be learnt on the job. Most employees had been with the company for many years, had an excellent knowledge of the job and moved readily from one team to another. The administration team was more sophisticated, managing a database holding 3,500 records for document distribution and a file maintenance database providing 17,500 names for targeted correspondence sorted by market segments such as leisure or corporate travel.

### *The Physical Environment*

Located in an old, industrial part of Kensington, Marketing Co was overshadowed by the silos of the Goodman Fielder bakeries. The three office areas at the front of the building were air-conditioned and partitioned. The furniture was old, but functional - there was no attempt to create a corporate image. Coming into Reception, which was tired looking but welcoming, the visitor could see through to the Manager's desk and across partitions to the administrative area. The Receptionist, wearing a telephone receiver headset, was the first point of contact,

but there was no formality. Behind this front office was a rather dingy area used for packing, adding stickers to brochures and sorting of documents. The dark corners of this room were stacked with old brochures and discarded equipment. A tearoom was adjacent. It looked old and grimy, but was obviously in constant use.

Through the tearoom was the warehouse, known as the 'shed', which was full of rows of pallets and shelving for millions of brochures. Staff described it as 'hot in summer and freezing in winter'. At least seven people worked full-time in this area, with more during the busy season leading up to Christmas. A table-tennis table and a dartboard were well used during tea and lunch breaks and after work.

### *Leadership*

The Manager described himself as 'an old leftie' who developed teams in the workplace because he wanted to provide a work environment 'where people can enjoy what they're doing'. He created teams in a spirit of inclusion, trust, humour and irreverence. The language and behaviour of people in the organisation was consciously 'down to earth'. Despite low salaries and quite harsh working conditions employees reported that they enjoyed working at Marketing Co and they were full of admiration for their Manager.

The Manager wanted to 'create an environment which gave people their dignity'. While being concerned to meet the needs of clients and to compete successfully in the industry his overriding vision was compassionate and his approach was slightly irreverent. Employees were unanimous in their support for his leadership style. The Manager was regarded as being flexible, approachable and hard working. He worked to erode any divisions that could arise between management and staff.

*He doesn't like to be seen as management. He likes to distance himself from management. He's got the right ideas ... I think the fact that there aren't those readily identifiable people, authority figures, in positions of power that are wielding or abusing their power, you know, does create that harmonious environment. (Storeman)*

Each employee felt valued as an individual because of the humour, the conversation, the family atmosphere and the safety of working at Marketing Co. Although many of the positions with the firm required few skills and could have been filled by casual workers, employees tended to be long term. Teamwork helped to cement the social and the task relationships which gave meaning to the work. Several employees said they modelled their work ethic and their behaviour on that of the Manager. His example was emulated and admired by his staff.

*I've worked with him for 8 years and I think I follow his lead - his way and the way he approaches people. Everyone's treated equal and treated like a human being, not like a number or clock in, clock off sort of thing.*

(Storeman)

### *Strategy*

Like most other aspects of the organisation, Marketing Co's goals were not formalized. There was no published mission statement and there were no processes in place for the development of objectives. The Manager's irreverence regarding management techniques was clear when he described the company's approach to strategy development,

*The only mission statement is when the directors get horribly drunk at the Annual Punch up and say let's go and listen to jazz. That's the mission statement.*

Nevertheless the Manager had a clear view of where the company should be heading: 'to increase market share, to take care of the core business and to branch out into new areas'. Team members agreed that they understood the principles guiding their daily activities. These were communicated informally when 'goals come up in general conversation. We talk about getting this client or that client.' Part of the firm's approach is to provide a high quality service,

*We have to give that sort of service. Doesn't matter whether it's a little brochure company or Qantas, they all get the same service. The reps come in and they all get treated equal.*

Part of the strategy involves close communication and trust. The atmosphere of the organisation was mellow, friendly and jovial. Humour formed a large part of the interchanges between staff. The Manager was central to this. His top drawer was full of junk which included favourite Leunig cartoons cut out of the paper, photos of staff and his Nepalese 'bosses hat'.

#### *Autonomy*

The employees believed their teams had control of their work, expressing the view that 'everyone's the boss of their own area'. Staff had confidence in their ability to make decisions about their work without interference. 'No-one's looking over your shoulder, but they're there if you need help'. The teams in the shed planned the work for each day with flexibility in the team membership helping to facilitate work schedules.

*Obviously there are times when things go wrong and things have to be pointed out to people, but you just try not to have that sort of figurehead out there.*

*You like to make it feel like everyone should know what they have to do. They can come across too if we don't come over and say hey look guys we're a bit behind. Do you reckon one of yours could come over here? And we say no worries and we just float across like that. They feel that we're all*

*approachable. (Packer)*

Employees felt close to each other as a social work group but they were unhappy about their remuneration levels and the opportunities offered by their jobs. These negative responses may be attributable to the relatively unskilled nature of the work conducted in the shed. Most employees were engaged in unpacking, sorting and re-packing large quantities of brochures. However, the same comment was made by a skilled administrative assistant:

*Wages. I can't remember the last time we had a pay rise apart from the CPI.*

*The company has grown. I know there's a lot of people who would be quite happy if at Christmas time they said here's a 50 dollar bonus. For years we had no lunch hours or morning teas. You didn't worry about that. You*

*worked through it but now we are bigger and you think for all those times - a little thank you.* (Administrative Assistant)

This may reflect Harley's (1994) warning of the exploitation of workers through team structures, arguing that any autonomy given was illusory and motivated by management's desire to enhance employee commitment. Nevertheless, all of the interviewees commented on the rewards they derived from the work itself and from the people they worked with.

*At the moment I'm surviving on my pay. I'm pretty happy. It's a nice work environment. They're the main things in life.* (Packer)

#### *Training and Development*

The company had no budget for training. The teams were implemented when the manager decided to call the task groups teams, along with some devolution of authority to each team.

#### *Conclusion*

The interviewees described teams made up of interdependent, autonomous and effective employees who enjoyed the atmosphere of their workplace and a collegiality often missing in more formal workplaces. The factors supporting positive team experiences at Marketing Co mostly reflected the behaviours, attitudes and preferences of the Manager. In particular, trust and humour, workforce stability, employee empowerment, open communication and intangible rewards were important in this case.

## **Case Study 2: Quarry Co**

#### *Background*

Quarry Co had 48 employees, mostly male. The company produced sand and aggregate and had four quarry sites. The company achieved quality certification in 1995 and in the same year teams were implemented. Every employee attended in-house team training sessions and became part of a clearly defined team. Team development training has continued since then. Teamwork was implemented along with sophisticated information management and communications systems in an organisation of predominantly unskilled workers. The company encompassed a fascinating mix of the old with the new. Many of the norms of

teamwork have always been present in the mateship of physical labour and some aspects of the transformation of work groups to teams had progressed relatively easily because of this.

### *The Physical Environment*

Quarry Co had a small, modern central location housing the administrative and marketing teams. The majority of the operational staff worked in the open air with relocatable facilities at each site. The landscapes surrounding each of the sites were extremely beautiful. Set in isolated places, with gums and scrub alive with bird song, the scoured land and huge machinery of the quarries took on a romantic aura. When the sound of heavy machinery ceased the quiet and solitude of these settings returned. The heavy machinery operators valued the opportunity their work gave them to work in the open air, describing the quarries both as 'dusty, muddy, scumbag holes' and, more seriously, as 'beautiful'.

### *Leadership*

The Manager was employed to implement change by way of implementing teams and modernising the information and communications technologies. To effect change he held regular meetings, communicated frequently with employees at five locations, involved staff in decision making and invested in training. All accounts of the Manager showed him to be visionary, persuasive and determined.

### *Strategy*

Productivity improvement, quality improvement, market expansion, including the export of rare coloured aggregate to Japan, improved information management, communication systems and teamwork were all on the agenda for Quarry Co under their new manager. His approach to team implementation was,

*It's not a con. The whole idea is to get them to enjoy work more and get better value from them.*

Operationally this was interpreted by one of the quarry managers as,

*The aim is to have multiskilling so that problems don't arise from having employees on RDOs<sup>1</sup> and others sick. The other advantage is that the team*

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<sup>1</sup> Rostered days off

*works themselves out and its pretty much an open rule that they get here in the morning and if they don't want to drive the machine they drove yesterday then they talk to the person they want to swap with and they can swap machines, providing they're authorised to operative that machine.*

The strategy was paying off for Quarry Co with productivity rising steadily under a team-based workforce.

#### *Autonomy*

Employees quickly began to understand what teamwork meant for the company. Teamwork provided a conscious approach to working well together – something that many of the manual workers already did naturally. Many positive comments were made about the benefits of teamwork for the employees. In many respects the *consciousness* of working as a team was important:

*The most positive aspect is possibly the fact that a group of people working together have been made aware that they are a team. (Operator)*

The team approach also had a beneficial effect on the workers' sense of worth.

*For me the best thing about teams is the understanding that the team can make a difference and we are able to put forward ideas for changes in the workplace. (Operator)*

There was a recognition that teamwork enhanced co-operation and communication:

*There has been an increase in co-operation amongst team members, a willingness to help others, knowing that if they need help or assistance it will be forthcoming. (Administrative worker)*

#### *Training and Development*

The manager offered training to all staff to improve their understanding of teamwork, quality processes, information technology and any other form of education they could be interested in. He believed that with a bit of training 'they can see the strategic position. Anybody in the organisation should have access to any information they want.'

### *Conclusion*

Teamwork at Quarry Co contributed to improvements in productivity, quality, information sharing and employee empowerment. The process of explicitly naming teams at each quarry site and taking advantage of existing emergent work groups, had enabled team members to be more confident of their roles and more trusting of each other in the consciousness that they were part of a team.

## **Case Study 3: Care Co**

### *Background*

Care Co was a small, not-for-profit, health services organisation. The organisation provided care to housebound, disabled and aged people in the western region of Melbourne. Two Case Managers assessed clients, developed care plans and made recommendations to the Manager of the program about the level and type of servicing required. The Case Managers maintained links with their clients and made ongoing recommendations regarding client care. Clients were provided with services to enable them to live at home as independently as possible. These services were provided through contracts with nursing staff, cleaners, home care - anything needed to enable someone to remain at home - it could be as simple as purchasing the services of someone to walk the client's dog.

### *The Physical Environment*

The staff of three professionals worked from a small weatherboard house in a suburban street in Werribee. Each staff member had a room as an office and the smell of freshly brewed coffee permeated the house. Normally the Manager worked from the house while the two Case Managers spent around 80 per cent of their time on the road in their own catchment areas. The three staff met at least once a week for a short time to discuss clients and make decisions regarding their care. Laptop computers with modem connections and mobile phones enabled the Case Managers to access a common database and to communicate from home or from their vehicles, or their clients' homes.

### *Leadership*

Some tensions were evident between the Manager and the Case Managers. Although communication was freely exchanged both Case Managers felt constrained by the manager's

interference in their decisions, a lack of training and poor support for the technologies they used. The Manager had placed ultimate faith in technology to support the team process, saying,

*We've adopted a range of technologies to cope with this diversity of operation, and, hopefully, I believe we've got both the culture of the technology and the way in which we operate that creates a unique team, that provides for quite high levels of individualism.*

However, the Case Manager's were more critical of this view saying they felt they were monitored by their Manager. This was partly a result of the separateness of their work.

*The isolation tends to lead to a state of mind where you don't believe the people around you really understand the work you are doing. So that generally their compliments and appraisal of your work is perhaps not received in the way they meant it. It can be seen as being a pat on the back, paternalistic, keep up the good work type of approach. (Case Manager)*

At the same time the Case Managers respected the Manager and worked well with him, describing him as confident and enthusiastic. 'He's not frightened, he's willing to have a go, and that's positive.'

### *Strategy*

The Manager believed the company needed to expand to sustain economies of scale over time. The Government had made a commitment to increase funding by 20 per cent a year, which would enable an additional Case Manager to be employed each year. When the Manager spoke of increasing the number of cases each Case Manager handled from 36 to 50, the two Case Managers expressed bewilderment at the increasing workload and the number of problems which had to be handled quickly and independently. Both Case Managers lamented the loss of collegial discussion and decision making. Interestingly in this case, where information technology was a driver of change, employees felt displaced, isolated and frustrated. They voiced their concern that 'we are not like a real team', believing that real teams spend a lot of time together. They struggled to understand their relationship because

they knew of no teams like theirs. They worked as a group towards shared goals and yet their geographical spread often meant they did not see each other daily.

#### *Autonomy*

The Case Manager's work was both enhanced and diminished as a result of technology. They were able to access and process more information while on site with their clients and this was a great advantage. The problem was that they were able to travel from one client to the next without visiting their central office, thereby creating a role for themselves which was extremely isolating, stressful and not terribly enjoyable.

The fundamentally important factor, the glue drawing the three team members together, was the motivation on the part of each individual to serve their clients well. Opportunities for creativity resulted from this.

*We spark each other off. We are able to talk about creating new situations in the clinical sense that is very inspiring. Because you have the opportunity to create something new and having the flexibility and autonomy means that you can go and try things. I'm currently looking at a process of transition to nursing home for clients, to develop a model that can be fairly well standardised. That's come out of discussions with my colleague. We bounce the ball philosophically around many of these issues. That's a very attractive part. (Case Manager)*

The Case Managers also enjoyed highly flexible roles. They appreciated being able to fit their work in around family commitments. This then enabled them to visit carers at appropriate times, often at 7 or 8 pm.

*We tend to go as we please. So long as we do our job and do it well. I really appreciate the flexibility. (Case Manager)*

#### *Training and Development*

Despite the organisation's heavy investment in new technologies no training or development programs were provided. This was explained as a financial constraint.

*If I had \$50,000 I could have employed a nice technical consultant and we would have had streamlined systems up and running from day one. But because I've had to do things on the cheap, it's two steps forward and one step back .. That causes a bit of angst.*

At the same time the Manager believed they were 'a football field ahead of a lot of organisations that we would benchmark ourselves against'.

#### *Conclusion*

Care Co was achieving high levels of productivity and was providing quick response to its clients because of the technology it had effectively adopted. It seems ironic that the rewards most highly valued by the Case Managers, collegiality, trust, personal interaction and a shared response to the needs of clients, were threatened by the adoption of technologies which facilitated dispersed and isolated work. The loneliness and stress of working in isolation calls for counterbalance through regular opportunities for the organisation to meet together, not only to discuss clients but to celebrate achievements, discuss opportunities for innovation and reinforce each individual's sense of belonging.

### **Case Study 4: Manufacturing Co**

#### *Background*

Manufacturing Co was a small manufacturing company located in Braybrook. The company had a reputation for quality and innovation in the development and manufacture of scales and weighing equipment. The company produced batching systems, platform weighers, hopper and tank weighers, weighbridges and cattle weighers. Computer software and computerised systems were developed in-house to operate each of these products. In the field, the company managed equipment installations including the civil works for weighbridges and weighbridge erections, equipment maintenance, system calibration, implementation and training. Many of the 27 employees were employed directly from school as apprentices and have stayed. The company's concern for people underpinned the use of teamwork. Teams have been 'the way we've always worked. We like people to know that they can help one another in their job.' (Managing Director).

### *The Physical Environment*

A large site provided facilities for manufacturing, stores and service areas on the ground floor with reception, administration, computer systems and marketing upstairs. The board room was also used as the staff room, the training room and the area for Friday night's 'happy hour'. It was a comfortable space with tea and coffee facilities, a microwave, a TV and radio, which was usually on, tuned to a popular station. On one wall a large pin board displayed a collection of apprentice certificates and hundreds of photos of the staff at various social gatherings over the years.

### *Leadership*

The Owner/Managing Director held the main decision making power. Under his direction the management team set strategic directions, established goals and communicated these to the teams. Management felt that the workers and the teams were nurtured through direct communication. The employees accepted the fact that decisions were made at the highest level. They appreciated being included in the language of such decisions.

*The boss decides who's going where. He talks about the work. He says 'we'.*

*He's always using 'we'.*

The employees were highly committed to the organisation and enjoyed their work. The Manager's work ethic was very strong and this was emulated amongst the staff. The Manager also set a tone of intimacy amongst the staff greeting them individually in the morning, making them coffee and saying good night at the end of the day. The staff understood that the customer always comes first and they were prepared to work long hours if necessary to meet a customer's needs. To facilitate this customers were considered to be part of the team during a project:

*Once we've sorted out what's required we can have a team meeting on the customer's site. We meet with the plant managers and the quality people to see what's required. That way, as a team, we all know what's going on.*

Recruitment into the organisation was managed carefully so that newcomers quickly came to share the values important to the company - trust, honesty, considerate behaviour, respect for

others and the joy of doing good work. This is reflected in the high attendance of employees at Friday night gatherings.

*The company really values that sort of thing. On Friday nights most people will get back here about 4 and we'll have drinks, chips and beer in here and (the Manager) will say something like 'Tell us about your overseas trip' to one of the staff and that will get everybody talking and that's good for when we get back into the workplace.*

### *Strategy*

Manufacturing Co had successfully expanded from a very small to a medium sized company with a reputation for innovation, extensive development and use of technology, and market growth both domestically and overseas. This family-style company was very patriarchal with team members at the beck and call of management. Having grown by employing and fostering young apprentices through to the senior management level, a strong culture had developed. The management group did not 'implement teamwork' but have always referred to people as working together in teams. There was a strong sense that they wanted everybody to work co-operatively wherever they were required:

*We work as a team, but like, you can split up the company into departments but it's nothing to do with departments because we all work together really. Like if I need a worker to do some drilling, some holes, or put something together I'll get one of the young fellas or one of the oldies educate them and get them to do it for me. So we're always working as a big team, one team, the whole place.*

Many long term employees had a financial interest in the company. After ten years most employees were offered this opportunity .

### *Autonomy*

Employees felt comfortable about taking time to attend to family matters or to be elsewhere during working time as a result of the trusting atmosphere engendered in the firm.

*I can set my own hours to suit my needs. I can start an hour earlier if need be.*

(Administrative Assistant)

*No one's looking over my shoulder. You can go early if you want to and work a bit longer another day.* (Apprentice)

*I can take the kids to school and come in later or I can go home early and work at night.* (Marketing Manager)

Employees felt sure that they worked in teams but they found it difficult to clearly define their team's boundaries. This was because the management team, made up of the Manager, his brother and several long-term employees who had become shareholders, consciously deprived the teams of an identity which would challenge allegiance to the firm as a whole. The management team wanted operational teams to work well, but not to be so cohesive as to resist taking directions from the manager of another section.

*By its very nature the teamwork is an interaction between virtually everybody in the place. It is vitally important. In a business this size, because we are so diverse, we cover such a wide range of areas the teamworking is such an integral part of it. Without it we wouldn't be able to function.*

(Administration).

### *Training and Development*

Although the Managing Director said the company had 'not spent much on training' the development of the staff through apprenticeships, support for further education, career planning and product knowledge was significant. The company had sought and won a \$42,000 government grant for in-house training programs. Nevertheless teams were not formally introduced and there was no training or development for teamwork. The teams were rather loose coalitions of people who worked in close proximity and who had a strongly developed ethos of 'lending a hand'.

*The idea is we just help each other. We give each other a hand. We're a team but we'll help out the computing guys or anybody. We don't see ourselves as an isolated group.* (Service)

### *Conclusion*

Manufacturing Co was a very successful company which developed a strong company culture with high levels of trust and commitment. The firm reflected the personal styles and preferences of its Owner/Managing Director – a highly moral, family-oriented firm which provided its employees with long-term, rewarding employment and in return expected a relatively high degree of conformance to the company's norms. The company did not 'implement teamwork' but always referred to people as 'working together as teams'.

Employees responded positively to this environment - they felt valued and trusted and consequently contributed positively to the firm's success.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has presented the case studies conducted in four companies, all of which use teams. The diversity of 'teamwork' is evident in the stories presented by these cases. In each company sound leadership and the craft of management is clearly present. The types of teams uncovered were very different, shaped by the culture and inspired by the leadership of the organisation.

The research indicates that teams are very much a part of the culture of small firms in this western region of Melbourne, however, the teams to be found here are very different to those described in the team literature. In none of the cases was there an attempt to achieve fully autonomous teams.

In these organisations teams were used because managers believed the teams resulted in improved performance, quality management, worker morale, involvement in the workplace and an enhanced sense of belonging and commitment. Employee satisfaction with their team was high in three of the four cases. The team approach helped to give employees a voice in processes, some autonomy, greater flexibility, and a sense of being able to cooperate with colleagues more readily. Each organisation had crafted a unique approach to teams which suited their needs, technology and culture.

These cases suggest that managers of small firms have valuable interpersonal and leadership skills and are able to nurture groups and informal teams to achieve high levels of performance. The case studies support the view that a successful organisation needs a strong foundation of trust between management and employees.

As Williams (1996) argues, teams can be pursued as emergent phenomena. They do not necessarily need to be engineered into being. Once identified, emergent teams require nurture through leadership actions which create a climate for trust.

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