

CHAPTER 15

GETTING AHEAD IN PRODUCT-ORIENTED ORGANIZATIONS

Most companies utilize teams of engineers organized into either product-oriented or functional-matrix structures. A typical product-oriented organization is shown in Figure 15-1. In the product-oriented organization everyone works on the same product. Often the entire department is responsible for getting the product out the door. Everyone in the product-oriented organization reports to a single upper-level manager at the top of the organization. The product-oriented organization in Figure 15-1 illustrates the reporting organization for the ZX50 car. Reporting to the departmental manager are the individual subsystem departments, in this case, four different departments. For the ZX50 car, there is the engine department responsible for designing and testing engines, the body-design department responsible for the exterior body, and so on. Each of these departments performs a necessary job within the organization.

Reporting to the department manager is often the program manager and usually one or two staff engineers. The program manager determines what is to be worked on and the engineering department determines the best technical approach. One very positive advantage to this type of organization is that your work direction and salary review often come through your supervisor. One person, your supervisor, provides the work direction and hands out the raises.

There are several advantages to working in a product-oriented organization. First, the organization gets to build the entire product. It is very rewarding to see the entire product come together in your department. It gives you a real sense of accomplishment. When the product is a huge success, management knows whom to reward. Second, everyone reports through the same chain and decisions are more easily made in this type of organization.

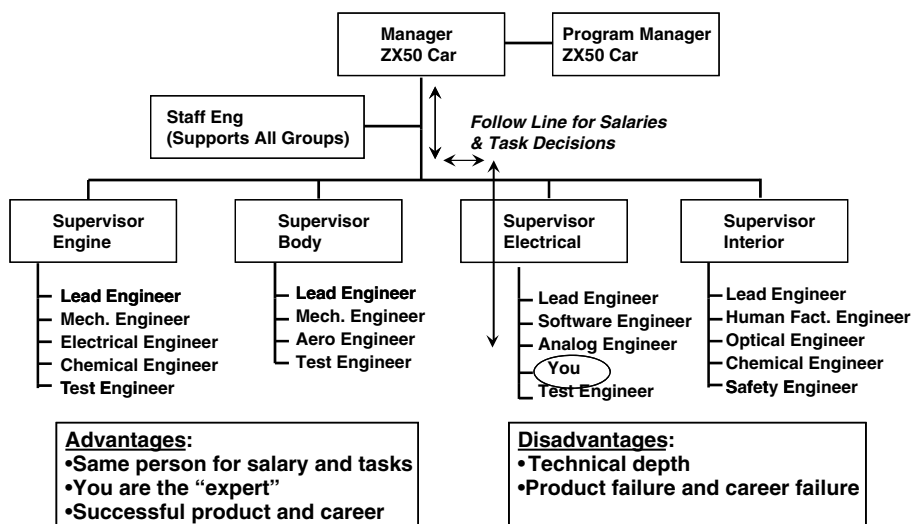


FIGURE 15-1 Typical product-oriented organization found in large corporations.

Third, you often work with people who have very different backgrounds and gaining new perspectives from them greatly broadens yours. Since staffing of organizations tends to be fairly lean, you might be the only one in the group with your type of background; an excellent and advantageous position, since there is no competition. Another advantage is that if you have the same background as the supervisor or manager, they can more easily appreciate and understand the work you are doing. Managers tend to promote people with backgrounds similar to their own.

There are some disadvantages to working in a product-oriented organization. When the product development stops, in most cases so does your career advancement. Also, if the product runs into trouble (due to poor planning or performance), you may have that cloud hanging over you or be tagged as coming from a troubled or failed program.

Another disadvantage of the product-oriented organization is the fact that your boss may not have the same technical background as you. If you are a chemical engineer and they are electrical, it is often hard for them to appreciate the great job you are doing. And finally, when the product comes to the end of its development, there may be no place for you to go unless a new product is being developed. Working on a single product often creates engineers who know everything about one little thing. A difficult position to be in if you plan on running the entire organization some day.

SUMMARY

The organizational structure of your engineering or product teams will drastically affect your career actions. If you are in a product organization

your career advancement actions should focus on producing successful products and the managers you directly report to. Getting ahead in this type of organization will require that you develop many skills outside of your engineering major and also have excellent people skills. The more rounded and big picture person you are the better, since to become a leader in this organization, you must be able to manage a team of very diverse backgrounds and talents who make your product successful.

Have you identified any career actions you want to take as a result of reading this chapter? If so, please make sure to capture these ideas before you forget by recording them in the notes section at the back of the book.

ASSIGNMENTS AND DISCUSSION TOPICS

- 1 Determine how your company is organized. Is it a product-oriented organization? Who reports to whom? Can you identify all the levels and the person at each level between you and the vice president? If you can, you're in great shape! If you don't know who they are, how can you expect them to know who you are and promote you?