

# How To Build A Team

Companies have been talking about teams for decades. But what does that really mean? Does it change anything to take an existing work group and call it a team? Are teams really different from groups? If so, what makes them different? Are teams really different? Better? More productive? Most leadership training includes material on teams. Few, however, really describe clearly what a team is or how to go about creating one. Many of the principles taught in leadership training such as the importance of clear expectations, clarity of purpose, collaboration, mutual trust building, relationship building and so forth are important for all kinds of groups and organizations, not just teams. Teamwork becomes important when the task demands that the members need one another to succeed. Interdependence is the key factor that separates teams from other kinds of groups. If the organization has tasks that naturally



lend themselves to this kind of interdependence, then teams may be the right way to go. If you have to artificially create “interdependence”

then the team members may feel manipulated. “Why are they putting us into teams? Wouldn’t this get done easier and better by assigning it to an individual and giving them a little staff support? What are they up to?”

## Before you create teams

There are many questions that need to be answered before you decide to set up teams in your organization. Depending on the reasons for your leadership training, many of those questions might be addressed early during the training sessions. Assuming that there is a task that calls for the kind of interdependence we have mentioned here or the work itself requires it, the additional questions that should be answered include:

- What is the team’s purpose/vision? If there is a clear organizational need for the team, the team member themselves might help to answer this question.

- What are the team’s primary functions? Identify problems? Generate solutions? Solve problems? Make recommendations? Make decisions? Implement solutions? Or, will the team simply go about the day-to-day task of getting the work done.
- Who should be on the team? If the team is structured around an interdependent task, it should be clear who the members should be. My first organizational mentor told me when I asked about team membership, “If he or she can mess it up, they should be on the team.”
- What are the rules of membership? How is it decided who joins the team or who leaves the team?
- How much authority does the team have? What is the source of that authority? How will it be determined if the team should continue on or disband? How much power does the team have?
- What type of team are you? Self-directed work team? Project team? Cross-functional team? Advisory group?
- What kind of leadership do you have? Want? Authoritarian? Bureaucratic? Participative? Consultative? Leaderless? Self-led?

This is just a sampling of the questions that should be addressed. Few companies are so thorough. More commonly, managers put people into teams, conduct a little team training, some leadership training, then stand back and wait for them to produce. Little wonder that many employees become discouraged. Under the right conditions, teams can produce far more than aggregates of individuals but it is not an easy thing to accomplish. Even if the company takes considerable care in designing the tasks so that there is a lot of interdependence and spends an adequate amount of time during their team training and the leadership training answering those important questions, there is still much to do. The team members need to learn how to work together in a team. While

this may seem obvious, the skills needed to be successful in a team are often quite different than those skills that they have been relying on to do their jobs.

### After you create teams

There are hundreds (probably thousands) of guidelines for building a team. It is a very complex process but all of the guides contain certain universals. At the risk of oversimplifying, here are what I believe to be the absolutely essential components for building an effective team.

- **Purpose.** There should be a compelling business reason for creating a team. The managers who are responsible for the function should have a clear understanding of how a team will help them meet their production, quality, customer service goals, etc. The team members should also understand their reason for being. Organizations where managers create teams to accomplish corporate goals but tell their employees that the team is really for some other purpose (having more fun, developing the team members, creating more work/life balance, etc.) will ultimately be found out. Most people are perfectly O.K. with being asked to help meet business objectives if they see it as an honest request and they are given the resources to do what needs to be done and are acknowledged for their efforts. It is often highly valuable to also create a joint vision of what the team should eventually become. The more that the managers and team members participate jointly in such a process, the greater clarity there is for everyone.
- **Structure.** Make sure that everyone understands how the team (or teams) is organized. It is important that the team leader knows his or her role and how to perform it. Don't skimp on leadership training for the immediate team leader. Make sure everyone on the team is clear about how much time, effort, and resources should be applied to the team's business. Get clear agreements on when and how the team meetings will be conducted. The most effective teams spend a

considerable amount of time on this. They establish standard agendas, ground rules, problem solving techniques, methods for communicating with management, how the process will be facilitated, etc. Make sure that everyone knows who belongs on the team.

- **Skills.** For many teams, this may be the hardest part. As individual contributors, it may not be so important the every employee is an excellent communicator but as a member of a team that changes. Effective teams need to build trust so that they are confident that they can rely on one another. Listening, giving and receiving feedback, resolving conflict, and problem



solving become highly important. Team members must learn to be more attuned to the more subtle aspects of relationship development, what we often refer to as "soft skills." Many of these skills can be addressed in good

leadership training during team start up but must also be reinforced and facilitated on an ongoing basis. Teams will find that they need to have conversations about topics that were previously discussed only with managers or with human resources specialists. It takes some time for team members to achieve a level of comfort with these skills so patience is advised.

- **Resources.** Nothing will kill a team faster than giving them a task to perform but withholding the resources needed to complete it. Make sure that the teams have access to the appropriate expertise (engineering, scientific, computer, etc.), ability to acquire needed materials, sufficient personnel, and time to spend on the team's tasks.
- **Measurement.** Finally, the team and the team's sponsors need clear mechanisms to tell them if they are making progress. These measurements should be jointly

created by the management and by the teams. They should be simple, clear, and the connection between the team's actions and the measurement should be undeniable. Few things are more motivating than knowing that you are part of something successful. The enthusiasm generated is often contagious. Few things are more de-motivating than being told you are not making enough progress but not understanding why that is so. The resulting discouragement is also contagious.

Organizations can benefit greatly from the creation of teams, but only if approached with the same sense of diligence and clarity that other business objectives are pursued. Over the years, many organizations have made a hash of their team process by giving it inferior status in the hierarchy of corporate objectives. It takes work to make a team effective. Not just hard work on the part of the team members but also by the managers whose organizations stand to benefit. Leadership training should include a major emphasis on the role of the managers in the team process.

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