

Teaming to Succeed: Creating Great Work Teams

“Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success.”

--Henry Ford

While most people appreciate the idea of successful teamwork, it's a concept that, for many organizations and workgroups, remains elusive. Partly because North American culture rewards individual successes and partly because, at times, the idea of consensus-building and collaboration can seem to slow our fast-paced, instant-results-driven world. Created without any thought or defined objectives, a 'mock' team can leave workers frustrated or worse, completely cynical about the entire process.

Great teams, on the other hand, uncover solutions that one person might not have come to on his or her own. They capitalize on the experience, insights and knowledge of its members and offer a fresh collective perspective that encourages innovation.

While it's not an easy task, you can help build a supportive environment that creates team triumphs instead of tragedies by carefully crafting your squad, supporting its success and effectively managing team tensions.

If You Build It...Team Construction 101

The foundation upon which the team is built is critical to the success or failure of the group. When the team is not well-organized, prepared and supported, the chances of collapse are significantly higher. Foster a strong, dynamic team through:

Respect. At the heart of every good team are a group of individuals who respect each other's ideas, experience and opinions no matter how divergent they are from their own. Offer team members equal time to speak and ensure everyone remains focused on each person's input. As a people leader, it's essential to lead by example: remain respectful of everyone's ideas (no matter how different they are from your own) and avoid talking over others or interrupting.

Diversity. While it may seem easier to group like-minded people together, it rarely produces the best results. Different ideas and viewpoints, though at times more challenging, can shine a light on overlooked issues or ideas and encourage innovation to flourish.

Clear roles, goals and objectives. *What is the purpose of the team? What are the individual roles of each team member? What is this work group aiming to achieve? What are the timelines?* These may seem like obvious questions, but many teams fail because their roles, purpose and ultimate objectives are never clearly defined. Members should have a clear idea of what their role and deliverables will be within the process. Team goals and objectives should be communicated from the outset or team members should be invited to help establish these during the first meeting.

Context. No team should function as an island detached from the organization. Help members stay motivated and understand the value of their work by thoroughly explaining how the project and their contribution fit into the greater organizational picture.

A culture of inclusion. Keep team members updated, solicit and show appreciation for input, and foster a friendly, respectful atmosphere. The more each individual feels part of the team, the more motivated they'll be to help it achieve its goals.

The right resources. Pulling together people who are too inexperienced, overburdened or unprepared for the project creates conditions for failure. Make sure your team has the adequate tools, resources and manpower to succeed. Offer training, mentorship or additional help to develop skills necessary to the project and the success of your employees.

Smaller teams. Groups that are too large can leave people feeling less invested in the group and, therefore, less enthusiastic about contributing to the team's success. Generally, groups of four to 10 people promote a greater sense of camaraderie and personal responsibility for the team's results.

Guiding the Group to Success

You've laid the groundwork for a good team. Now it's time to encourage you're squad to stay on course. Keep the positive team spirit flowing by:

Encouraging open communication. Remember that history teacher in high school that took pleasure in your mistakes? Remember how difficult it was to get the students to talk? If you really want employees to be engaged, contributing members of the team, it's vital that you foster an environment where open dialogue and constructive feedback are welcomed and encouraged. Positive and honest communication, where employees are unafraid to sound "foolish" or make a mistake, not only encourages the team to bond, but helps it remain solution-focused.

Empowering people with the authority to make decisions. If you want team members to take ownership for their work and invest energy into the project, they need to feel they have some control over what's decided on. If you're concerned about the consequences of handing over this kind of authority remember: clear expectations, well-defined goals and context beforehand will go a long way in ensuring team members make informed, well-thought-out choices.

Promoting inclusiveness. One of the biggest challenges of group dynamics is trying to maintain balance between extroverted team members and those who take a more subdued approach to participation. Prevent more outspoken members of the group from taking over and encourage shy teammates to speak up: solicit input from everyone on the team and politely 'cap' responses to a preset time limit. Teammates not able to attend a meeting should be updated and everyone should be kept in the loop about progress, setbacks or changes to the project.

Getting into group activities. Activities the team participates in together—whether a workshop, lunch outing or fundraising event—can help build familiarity, trust and understanding amongst team members.

Capitalizing on strengths and downplaying weaknesses. Build team confidence—and in turn fortify each member's self-confidence and commitment to the group—by highlighting collective and individual strengths. If a team member is having trouble keeping up, work together to come up with a solution—additional support, training or time—to help bring him or her up to speed.

Rewarding as a team. A team that celebrates together works together. Team—rather than individual— incentives help to create a dynamic of 'working towards the team's success.' A group reward encourages everyone to pitch in and can eliminate—or at least minimize—the negative impact of cut-throat competition amongst individuals.

Managing interactions. While each member of the team is responsible for his or her independent actions within the group, as the team leader, your job is ensure the team's dealings with one another are respectful, constructive and are effectively contributing to the team's objectives.

Easing Team Tensions

If there's one certainty about conflict, it's that it can't be avoided, particularly when people are working closely together day in and day out. How it's handled, however, can greatly affect the team's experience and project outcome. Minimize the damage of disputes by:

- Acknowledging that conflict exists
- Getting the full story from the people involved
- Trying to find some common ground on which to build a solution
- Creating a team plan—with each team member's actions clearly outlined—to deal with the issue quickly and appropriately

Don't:

- Personalize the conflict
- Put team members in a position where they're pressured to choose sides
- Ignore the problem in hopes that it "goes away"

Before they're even operating, many teams are set up for failure. Lack of support, unrealistic or ill-defined expectations and unclear roles can all sabotage even the most promising group of workers. But by fostering a culture of collaboration, proactively mapping out the team's goals and swiftly dealing with squabbles when they arise, you can build a team that not only works well together, but encourages employees to forge a new, cohesive path to success.

If you require support to deal with a sensitive employee situation, contact Shepell-fgi to find out more about the consultation and training services your Employee Assistance Program provides.

Call 1 866 833-7690