

# How to Build and Manage Great Teams

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It's a scenario every top manager knows well: The organization needs to move quickly toward a new, mission-critical objective, and it's up to him or her to draft and manage the right team of go-getters to lead the effort.

Yet many team leaders never hit their goals – not because they lack talent on their staffs, but because they're naive to the complexities of team dynamics. Smart managers understand what type of group model best suits the task, what key skills to look for (and which to avoid), and how to coax top performances from everyone starting from day one.

## Things you will need:

- Nada – unless you decide to make a key outside hire.
- A few days to assess roles for potential team members and write up a plan.
- **Shared Workspace:** Provide a place, such as a conference room or a staff lounge, for formal and informal collaboration.
- **Clearly Written Objectives:** Write an outline of the task and why it's crucial to help your team members decide on a workable plan and a hard deadline.
- **Four to 10 People:** Don't go overboard. The most successful teams are small ones.

A yellow sticky note with the text 'step 1' written in black.

## Start with the Task, Not the Team

### Goal: Decide whether you need a team at all.

You've just received a new set of marching orders, but do you really need to launch and manage a team to carry them out? After all, shouldn't well-managed organizations be capable of hitting ambitious goals year-round?

"I try to take attention away from the notion that teams are always good," says Zia Khan, principal in the San Francisco office of Katzenbach Partners, an organizational consulting firm with clients that include Aetna and Pfizer. "Strong-performing organizations don't have teams running around all over the place. They are disciplined enough to determine whether it's more efficient to start a team."

So how do you know if your task calls for team treatment? Khan asks clients to wrestle with three initial questions:

**Do you know how to get the job done?** Straightforward, clearly defined tasks are better suited to what Khan calls a *leader-led group*, in which members work individually on specific tasks and report back to a top manager. If the task or process is unfamiliar, he recommends a *real team*, which has defined roles but a more fluid, dynamic structure.

**Does the job require constant collaboration?** Do colleagues need to work together to solve problems and deliver their work as a group? That calls for a real team. If colleagues will carry out key tasks individually, a leader-led process is the faster, smarter approach.

**Do you have a leader?** There's an obvious but important point here: Leader-led groups require a strong boss – someone who understands roles, communicates well, knows what needs to be delivered and when.

### For Example

Here are a couple of examples of tasks and the working group types that best suit them.

**Task No. 1:** You run an accounting department for a company that has just won several new accounts from a major client. You're familiar with the work that will be involved in scaling up, and you know just who in your organization will likely handle each critical task. This won't require much in the way of meetings or brainstorming, just delegating to people within your group and checking in on their progress.

**TEAM MODEL:** Leader-led

**Task No. 2:** An engineer built a prototype for a product that is unlike anything your company has made before. The process for bringing it to market is equally new and unproven. You have an idea of who can help guide its development, but roles will likely change as the project evolves. This task is best suited to forming a team with collaborative problem solvers who will share responsibility for the project's success – or its failure.

**TEAM MODEL:** Real team

step 2

## Draft Your Players

**Goal: Fill key roles to help your team keep moving forward.**

Many managers stumble right out of the gate when pulling together a team for the first time. They often assemble teams that reflect the structure of the greater organization rather than the needs of the task at hand. It's a gesture of diplomacy, to be sure, but it rarely gets the job done. "We call it the United Nations factor," Khan says. "Picture all of these representatives from different departments sitting behind their little flags."

In drafting team members, forget trying to mix and match just vocational skills – work styles and interpersonal skills are just as important. London Business School management professor Lynda Gratton explains that some members should be strong internal cooperators while others – called boundary spanners – need to be adept at reaching out to people and resources outside the group.

In her book, “Hot Spots: Why Some Teams, Workplaces, and Organizations Buzz with Energy – And Others Don’t,” Gratton points out that the cooperative team members bring interpersonal skills – effective communication, problem solving, and conflict resolution – to the table. Boundary spanners, meanwhile, pull in fresh ideas and insights from any source – inside or out.

While drafting your players, swear allegiance to the smaller-is-better rule. A team should top out at around 10 or 12 people, Khan says. This is a good number for maintaining clarity of purpose and role, good communication, and personal investment in the team’s success. At FedEx Kinko’s, for example, Sherry Vidal-Brown, vice president of human resources, adds that if her team’s purpose is brainstorming, she’ll invite up to 15 employees, but if the task needs to be done quickly, she caps the team at six.

### **Danger! Danger! Danger!**

#### **Great Teams Aren’t Necessarily Happy Ones**

Part of good teamwork is getting along with your colleagues, but don’t mistake critical cooperation for unnecessary bonhomie. Members of successful teams often don’t need to spend time together after-hours – or even like each other.

In fact, creative energy and innovation often are fueled by some degree of conflict. Khan explains: “You can have people who don’t like each other and still have a great team, as long as they respect each other.” Managers can foster that respect by choosing people with complementary skill sets, communicating what skills everyone brings to the table, setting a tone for open communication from the start, and establishing expectations for behavior and cooperation.

step 3

## **Make Sure Everyone’s a Player**

### **Goal: Rally your team around a vision with clearly defined roles.**

Remember how the so-called “Dream Team” of men’s basketball finished with a humiliating bronze medal in the 2004 Olympics? It was a group packed with NBA stars and coaches but bereft of critical team dynamics. Khan and others refer to that team as a cautionary tale to corporate managers: No matter how talented a team you pull together, if members don’t understand what type of contribution is expected of them, they’ll turn in a forgettable performance.

So what is a team leader's hedge against such disasters? He or she must clearly explain objectives, demand equal input from all members, and make it clear that passive participation isn't allowed. "One important challenge is to limit the number of so-called spectators," says Margaret Neale, professor of organizational behavior at Stanford Graduate School of Business. "By the end of the first meeting, everyone should have spoken at least once. If a team member remains a spectator after that, that's someone you don't need."

Be explicit and consistent about performance expectations from the start: A happy and productive team member is one who is sure he or she is making a difference.

## Big Idea

### When in Doubt, Juggle the Lineup

Great team managers can often become victims of their own success. They find a formula for running projects or campaigns, and those that work the best serve as models for future projects. "Successful teams get enamored of their own success," Neale explains. "They want to keep doing things the way they have been doing them, which is fine as long as the environment doesn't change. But if it does, sometimes you need to bring a new person on to make the old-timers question the accepted ways of doing things."

At Neo, Ogilvy & Mather's search-marketing division, no one stays on a piece of work for more than two years – a policy that helps the company constantly stoke ad campaigns with fresh ideas. "We make innovation part of the routine," says Greg Smith, Neo's chief operating officer. "Everyone is held accountable for thinking in an innovative way. Ideas may come out of left field, but who wants to use last year's plan?"

step 4

## Allow Your Team to Fail – Then Discuss Why

**Goal: Don't cling to unrealistic objectives; take them up when there's more time.**

One of the biggest reasons corporate teams fail is an unwillingness to sacrifice best-case scenarios in order to reach the final goal. Managers too often get caught up in grandiose objectives that don't match changing time constraints. "In every success, some stretch objectives are abandoned, which is the right thing at the time," says Jay Kidd, executive vice president of strategic operations at Network Appliance.

When the team has achieved a level of success, the manager can reintroduce more challenging objectives or new ideas. Kidd says, "A successful team will be more ready for a challenge than a challenged team will achieve success."

Once the task is complete and you have some time to look back, managers should openly discuss successes and failures with the team. "Creating a context where the team can talk

about performance is crucial,” Gratton says. Her team uses a 360-degree evaluation tool that solicits feedback from members, leaders, and clients. Obtaining feedback from various sources keeps each person informed about which traits benefit the team and which areas need improvement.

“It’s better to over-communicate and be as transparent and honest as possible,” Kidd says. He says he makes sure his teams are clear on how they can win – and if he finds a team struggling, he’s the first to call a meeting to explain why.

## Other Resources

### More Resources on Team-Building

Gratton, Lynda. “Hot Spots: Why Some Teams, Workplaces, and Organizations Buzz with Energy – and Others Don’t.” Berrett-Kohler, 2007.

Katzenbach, Jon R.; Douglas K. Smith. “The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High-Performance Organization.” HarperCollins, 2006.