

Building Winning Teams

By BNET Editorial

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Building great teams starts with understand what great teamwork means. All too often, people think that a 'team player' is someone who fits quietly into a group and keeps out of trouble. But if everyone behaved like that, a team wouldn't work effectively—a flock of sheep may hang together well, but their only accomplishment is to eat grass.

Teams and team-based projects have become common in organizations, yet managing teams is a difficult aspect of leadership. Team leaders must have an understanding of:

- the **benefits** of team-building—what a team can achieve and what the leader should be striving for;
- **team roles and dynamics**—how teams work and achieve their greatest success;
- the stages of **team development**—what they are and how to support the team in each stage;
- the features of a successful team;
- mistakes to avoid.

What You Need to Know

What are the characteristics of a successful team leader?

Leadership is the capacity to establish direction and motivate others toward working for a common aim. Successful teamwork depends on the team leader's ability to make sure all team members know their common aim and what they each need to do to achieve it.

For a team to work, it's essential that all members are committed to that aim, so leaders must themselves be supportive, enthusiastic, and motivating. They must organize and communicate well in order to co-ordinate team efforts both *within* the team and with others *outside* the team. During difficult times, team leaders need to be approachable, good listeners who can offer feedback and advice.

What are the characteristics of a successful team?

A good team includes members who work at understanding each other, and communicate honestly and openly. They're committed to the team's success and are respectful and supportive of each other, sharing information and experience. They don't waste time trying to achieve success at the expense of others. A good team acknowledges the role of the leader and understands that there are circumstances when he or she will need to step in and make a decision. Conflict is unavoidable in

most work situations. A good team will work through conflict by generating new ideas and reaching an understanding.

What to Do

Decide If the Work Calls for a Team

Think about whether the job at hand really does need a team to tackle it. Some types of work, such as repetitive or unskilled tasks or specialized activities, are best performed by people working alone. And people who work well alone may actually decline in productivity if they are forced to join a team.

Enable the Team to Succeed

The team approach for organizing work depends on empowerment, that is, making sure that each person is allowed to perform to the best of his or her abilities. Empowerment relies on trust, the confidence that a manager has in the qualities and caliber of the employees. It also depends on how well members of a group have developed an understanding of each other's strengths and weaknesses. If your budget allows, training in teamwork can help team members understand these keys to success.

Reward Teams at the Right Time

All teams need to be assessed, but how should it be done so that it's positive and constructive? One way is to set objectives for teams and judge how well these have been met, the "top-down" approach in which senior managers set the objectives and evaluate team performance. In larger organizations, this approach is given added impetus by performance-related bonuses. The rationale is that teams need incentives and won't perform well without them.

But this approach can backfire. Success in meeting objectives depends partly on circumstances and contingencies, and may not be commensurate with effort or skill. In the end, people may focus more on the shortcomings of the incentive than on the sense and purpose of their work. For these reasons, retrospective awards for good team performance (that is, given once the project is complete) can work better than rewards promised in advance.

Play to People's Strengths

Once you have an assigned task and an assembled team, work out who will be doing what, playing to the best strengths of the individual team members. Make sure each person is allowed to develop ownership, pride, and maximum commitment to the team's responsibilities and is accountable for his or her work. The team leader should delegate effectively, and he or she should take the time to understand what will motivate the team and help give it momentum.

What to Avoid

You Misunderstand Team Members

Obviously, it's crucial that the team leader understand the nature of the work being undertaken. But you also need to be aware of the skills, experience, and approach of those doing the work. Taking account of people's strengths and motivations can certainly help to build or break teams.

You Don't Understand Team Dynamics

Don't become too glib about the terminology. "Team" and "teamwork" too easily become meaningless words. Remember to spend time on evaluating whether you really need a team to complete a given task before you embark on a team exercise. If you opt for a team, recognize that not everyone flourishes in a team. Some people will need more support than others.

If you're the team leader, remember that you have to allow team members the freedom to do what their role entails—empower them. Give them all the information they need and a clear understanding of what is expected.

Where to Learn More

Books:

Clutterbuck, David. *Coaching the Team at Work*. Nicholas Brealey, 2007.

Katzenbach, Jon R., and Douglas K. Smith. *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High-Performance Organization*. Collins, 2003.

Maginn, Michael. *Making Teams Work: 24 Lessons for Working Together Successfully*. McGraw-Hill, 2003.

Journal Articles:

Oglethorpe, Ray. "What Makes Teams Work?" *Fast Company*, #40, October 2000.

Snyder, Bill. "Teams That Span Time Zones Face New Work Rules." *Stanford Business*, May 2003.

Web Site:

The Center for Collaborative Organizations at the University of North Texas: www.workteams.unt.edu