

The Wisdom of Teams

Common Approaches to Building Team Performance

- **Establish urgency and direction.** All team members need to believe the team has urgent and worthwhile purpose, and they want to know what the expectations are. Indeed, the more urgent and meaningful the rationale, the more likely it is that a real team will emerge. The best team charters are clear enough to indicate performance expectations, but flexible enough to allow teams to shape their own purpose, goals, and approach.
- **Select members based on skill and skill potential, not personalities.** Teams must have the complementary skills needed to do their job. Three categories of skills are relevant: 1) technical and functional, 2) problem-solving, and 3) interpersonal. The key issue for potential teams is striking the right balance between members who already possess the needed skill levels versus developing the skill levels after the team gets started.
- **Pay particular attention to first meetings and actions.** Initial impressions always mean a great deal. When potential teams first gather, everyone alertly monitors the signals given by others to confirm, suspend, or dispel going-in assumptions and concerns. They particularly pay attention to those in authority: The team leader and any executives who set up, oversee, or otherwise influence the team. And, as always, what such leaders do is more important than what they say.
- **Set some clear rules of behavior.** All real teams develop rules of conduct to help them achieve their purpose and performance goals. The most critical early rules pertain to attendance (for example: "no interruptions to take phone calls"), discussion (no "sacred cows"), confidentiality, analytic approach, constructive confrontation (no finger pointing), and often the most important -everyone does real work.
- **Set and seize upon a few immediate performance-oriented tasks and goals.** Most teams trace their advancement to key performance-oriented events that forge them together. Potential teams can set such events in motion by immediately establishing a few challenging yet achievable goals that can be reached early on.
- **Challenge the group regularly with fresh facts and information.** New information causes a potential team to redefine and enrich its understanding of the performance challenge, thereby helping the team shape a common purpose, set clearer goals, and improve on its common approach.
- **Spend lots of time together.** Common sense tells us that teams must spend a lot of time together, especially at the beginning. Yet potential teams often fail to do so. The time spent together must be both scheduled and unscheduled. Indeed, creative insights as well as personal bonding require impromptu and casual interactions just as much as analyzing spreadsheets, interviewing customers, competitor, or fellow employees, and constantly debating issues.
- **Exploit the power of positive feedback, recognition, and reward.** Positive reinforcement works as well in a team context as elsewhere. "Giving out gold stars" helps to shape new behaviors critical to team performance. If people in the group, for example, are alert to a shy person's initial efforts to speak up and contribute, they can give him or her the positive reinforcement that encourages continued contributions

Six Things Necessary to Good Team Leadership

1. **Keep the purpose, goals, and approach relevant and meaningful.** All teams must shape their own common purpose, performance goals and approach. While a leader must be a full working member of the team who can and should contribute to these, he or she also stands apart from the team by virtue of his or her selection as leader. Teams expect their leader to use that perspective and distance to help the teams clarify and commit to their mission, goals, and approach.
2. **Build commitment and confidence.** Team leaders should work to build the commitment and confidence of each individual as well as the team as a whole.
3. **Strengthen the mix and level of skills.** Effective team leaders are vigilant about skills. Their goal is clear: ultimately, the flexible and top-performing teams consist of people with all the technical, functional, problem-solving, decision-making, interpersonal, and teamwork skills the team needs to perform. To get there, team leaders encourage people to take the risks needed for growth and development. They also continually challenge team members by shifting assignments and role patterns.
4. **Manage relationships with outsiders, including removing obstacles.** Team leaders are expected, by people outside as well as inside the team to manage much of the team's contacts and relationships with the rest of the organization. This calls on team leaders to communicate effectively the team's purpose, goals, and approach to anyone who might help or hinder it. They also must have the courage to intercede on the team's behalf when obstacles that might cripple or demoralize the team get placed in their way.
5. **Create opportunities for others.** Team performance is not possible if the leader grabs all the best opportunities, assignments, and credit. Indeed, the crux of the leader's challenge is to provide performance opportunities to the team and the people on it.
6. **Do real work.** Everyone on a real team, including the leader, does real work in roughly equivalent amounts. Team leaders do have a certain distance from the team by virtue of their position, but they do not use that distance "just to sit back and make decisions." Team leaders must contribute in whatever way the team needs, just like any other member. Moreover, team leaders do not delegate the nasty jobs to others. Where personal risks are high or "dirty work" is required, the team leader should step forward.