



Cover Story

How to Build and Maintain Balanced Work Teams

By Greg Kinnaird

Teams are most effective when members have an understanding of how each team member works and thinks as they strive towards a common goal.

DEVELOPING work teams is an essential skill that all effective managers and leaders must have in their competency toolkit. The evidence is crystal clear. Highly effective teams increase productivity, reduce customer complaints, and are more flexible within fixed organisational systems and procedures. Leaders will also observe an increase in morale, reduction in sick leave, and an improvement in staff satisfaction.

To competently build and maintain balanced teams the leader must have clarity on the following seven areas to maximise team performance.

Team Dedication

The team's dedication to the organisation's vision, mission, and values provides all team players with a concise sense of purpose and commitment. To increase motivation, team members must understand where they fit into the broader corporate picture. Once an individual's and the team's goals and objectives are aligned, people become focused on the task at hand and get the job done.

Team dedication is the foundation of team synergy. When this occurs, individuals will put aside their personal requirements for the greater good of the team. Once people start to work collectively, they create a shared common goal so that problems, decisions and actions can be proactively put in place with a dramatic reduction in interpersonal conflict.

A team operating in a synergistic culture will automatically create goals and outcomes with the bigger corporate picture in mind, and will create boundaries that satisfy all individuals within the work team.

Conflict is resolved with a high level of emotional maturity and a focus on goals, values and purposes to reach workable compromises. Blame and fault finding do not form part of the professional mindset of a balanced work team.

To increase team dedication, the Australasian Management Centre, AMC, suggests that managers create a positive and non-threatening environment where each work team can create its own vision and values that reflect the culture and philosophies of individuals within the team. It is critical that outcomes are transferred back into the workplace immediately and that leaders walk the talk to reinforce the core values of the team.

The effective manager will have a reputation for leading by example and for encouraging each team to develop goals and objectives that can be continuously improved and refined on a day to day basis. Recognising and rewarding success milestones helps strengthen personal and team motivation and is vital for achieving ongoing results.

It takes time, space, and effort to create a balanced team. The reality is that an ineffective manager or leader who is constantly fire fighting will use far more energy than an effective manager who does it correctly to start with.

The investment of time into building a balanced team is not to be taken lightly. It is important to understand that quality inputs equal quality outputs.

Collective Input

The energy and output of a team is in direct proportion to the skills and knowledge within that team. The effective leader will make sure that the team has the specific skills sets required to complete a quality job. It is essential that leaders develop a learning environment by encouraging multiskilling and multitasking.

The team leader will also maintain his integrity by being accountable and responsible for getting things done. It is important to share the workload between team members to reduce the risk of stress, burnout, and apathy. This is done through effective delegation of tasks that are interesting and challenging to maintain a high level of motivation within the team.

To encourage collective input the competent manager will take the following factors into consideration:

1. Inclusiveness
2. Contribution
3. Self Empowerment.

The more individuals feel that they are part of the team, the more they are likely to contribute to meetings and discussions. The more committed they are to the team, the more they will be willing to accept and embrace initiatives that reinforce self empowerment.

Every workplace manager needs to be proactive in keeping people informed, and providing opportunities that encourage input in a non-threatening environment. Be action orientated and let people know that you expect them to contribute at meetings. If they are not attending meetings, perhaps because of the perceived low value of information, encourage them to attend and contribute to the discussion. Let them know that their ideas, suggestions, and frustrations are important to the success of the team. Inform them that you expect their contribution at the next meeting. Show appreciation and give praise when people offer suggestions, recommendations or ideas. Remember to reward the positive behaviour of team members.

The respect of others and personal self-esteem is important for ongoing individual motivation. People will only put in effort if they know that there will be a positive outcome. People don't like to fail. A sense of failure leads to apathy, disruptive workplace behaviour, and resignations. As a leader, provide constant constructive support and feedback to all individuals with the team.

Instill confidence by recognising the accomplishments, talent, and experience in the team and reinforce this by referring to previous successes. Encourage people to learn and support each other so that they don't become reliant on you for decisions and answers. Make sure you give your people relevant and meaningful training so as to build pride and respect for a job well done. Have your people review and evaluate how well they support each others' contributions in meetings and on projects.

Discussion and Dialogue

To be effective, a work team needs to feel comfortable in saying what it thinks. Individuals within the team need to know that it is okay to ask for help and assistance. As a leader, you need to maintain a "safe" environment where people can share creative ideas that may appear unpopular if risk taking is involved.

Effective and competent leaders will constantly consider ways to reinforce trust, communication, rapport and concern. They will encourage a working environment that is focused on solutions not problems. This can only be done by leading by example and communicating openly, with no hidden agendas.

When people know and respect each other, it is more likely that effective communication will occur. Create opportunities to talk face to face and discourage people who have become "socially lazy" through E-mail communication. Have your people share personal information as well as workplace information and send out a clear message that diversity within the team should be respected and embraced. Basically, reinforce the fundamentals of business etiquette—hello, thank you, and goodbye.

There is a direct correlation between positive and open communication and work team energy. The rules are easy. To energise the team, focus on what the team likes, needs and wants. To de-energise, simply allow them to complain and assign blame. The latter is guaranteed to turn a winning team into a festering sore.

Consider providing regular and frequent skills training based on listening, responding, questioning, and problem solving to encourage collaborative decision-making among the team.

Teamwork and Cooperation

Working together is vital for corporate success. Gone are the days of individual players running their own race. The focus is on teamwork and team results.

As a leader, you will need to balance reward and recognition of individual achievements against the team's goals. AMC recommends that leaders use the CATS model of effective team behaviour (creativity, accuracy, timeframes, spirit) when giving feedback. This will act as a reference point to gauge teamwork synergy.

- **Creativity**

Creativity is the idea and innovation is the action to that idea. Encourage team members to stretch their paradigms and think outside the box. Let them know that it is okay to take risks and to make mistakes. Reinforce that they will be fully supported when trying new ideas and concepts.

- **Accuracy**

Develop personal pride in doing a quality job, first time, every time. Reinforce the good behaviour of those people wanting to maintain high standards. Encourage people to act as informal role models who are willing to work with others to get the job done on time, on budget and to the level of quality that customers require.

- **Timeframes**

Create a professional atmosphere by asking people to set and meet agreed timeframes with their work colleagues. The competent manager and leader will need to set and maintain standards by ensuring that they are never late for their own meetings.

- **Spirit**

As a leader, you will need to sit down with your people to talk about what it means to be part of the team. Take time to create and discuss the team values so that they become entrenched in workplace behaviour. At your next meeting, make reference to these values so that your team can clearly see what is expected of them. Remember, your workplace is watching what you do. Make sure you are walking the talk.

Conflict Resolution

Conflict is normal and to be expected, hence the need for your team to embrace conflict and deal with it in a positive and mature manner. Conflict avoidance does nothing more than draw out the pain, like a stone in your shoe.

The effective manager and leader will encourage diversity within a team. This automatically brings differences in values, opinions, and attitudes towards various situations at work. The easiest way of dealing with this is by showing team members how to shift their paradigms (mental mindset filters) about resolving conflict on general matters, personal matters, and task matters.

Create an environment where your team can reframe the problem and look at the merits and benefits of an idea before discounting and prejudging. Consider offering statements to the team so that they gain an appreciation of different points of view. This is a great way to build empathy and rapport.

Make sure that you keep egocentric remarks in check and reinforce the downside consequences of labelling people and categorising tasks. Failure to do so risks creating a perpetual cycle of destruction.

Conflict resolution is about respecting others and maintaining self esteem. Encourage people to feel empowered and personally responsible for their own actions and outcomes.

As a leader, create a solution-orientated environment that reinforces good behaviour. Make sure you don't inadvertently reward bad behaviour by giving in to those people who have learnt to whinge and moan to get what they want.

Managing Change and Innovation

As a leader, it is crucial that teams are flexible and respond quickly to market forces. The best teams are early adopters of innovation initiatives that are rolled out in the workplace. They embrace chaos and thrive on variety and challenge.

The effective team leader will assist his or her team to identify risks and be proactive in seeking out the inherent opportunities that arise from change.

During times of change, the need for personal security increases. Make sure that you give your team the resources and tools that they need in order to work effectively. Maintain a high level of communication with your people and respond to questions quickly and succinctly. If you don't know the answer, find it.

Centres of Influence

It is not only what you know but who you know. As a leader, you will need to encourage your team to maintain positive workplace relationships with people outside their immediate work area.

It is important that they interact and network effectively with people who are likely to be centres of influence on current and future projects.

Teams need to start thinking in terms of serving the internal customer. Reward and recognise people who are making the effort to communicate openly, solve problems, ask questions, and negotiate effectively to resolve differences. As a leader, make sure your door is always open: not in words but in action.

Teams are most effective when members have an understanding of how each other team member works and thinks as they strive towards a common goal. As a manager it is your job to make it happen.

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