What Makes a Great Team?

By John Condia & Golnaz Sadri

Teamwork can have a dramatic effect on your organization's performance. Here are secrets of success.

Work teams are key to high-performing organizations. We can define work teams as groups that regulate their own behavior to complete tasks. Two key characteristics of self-managed work teams are:

- **interdependent people** contributing to a product, project, or service
- **discretion over decisions** such as work assignments, methods, and scheduling.

Why Create a Team?

Although it takes time to develop successful teams, the advantages make the effort worthwhile. Self-managed work teams can help your organization do the following:

Increase employees' roles by adding more managerial and leadership activities to their responsibilities.

Arrange tasks according to measurable systems, allowing team members to evaluate their own work.

Provide greater job satisfaction and stronger employee commitment to the organization.

Improve quality and efficiency over traditionally managed groups.

Boost flexibility due to cross-training of employees.

Develop better problem-solving due to team members' increased knowledge of processes.

What Are the Keys to a Successful Work Team?

First of all, teams must have the support of the entire organization. They can't succeed if they aren't given the resources, autonomy, and backing they need. In addition, the following characteristics define a successful work team:

THE TEAM MUST UPHOLD ETHICAL VALUES.

The members of successful teams recognize and uphold ethical values for themselves as individuals, for the team, and for the organization. They abide by the organization's ethical guidelines and make decisions based on these values. They also communicate these values to other team members, clients, customers, and stakeholders.

TEAM MEMBERS MUST ORGANIZE THEIR WORK ENVIRONMENT.

To help complete goals, people need to manage their work processes and surroundings using a systematic approach. One such system is the Japanese "5S" method, which includes:

Sorting: identifying what's needed in the work environment and what's not

Simplifying: assuring that there's a place for everything and everything is in its proper place

Sweeping: performing a physical and visual analysis of the work environment to ensure that it is clean, in good order, and safe, and that routine maintenance has been performed

Standardizing: making sure that all work stations are arranged in the same way to ensure easy review across multiple workgroups

Self-Discipline: reviewing the work environment for continual improvement.

In addition, managing the team's work processes needs to include training new team members, innovating, and problem-solving when needed. All team members must agree to complete their assigned objectives within the time constraints set up by the team.

THE TEAM MUST PARTICIPATE IN THE ORGANIZATION'S SYSTEMS AND STRATEGIES.

Though self-managed work teams are set up to be autonomous, they still need to align their systems and strategies with those of

the organization. It's important for the team to define its reason for existing and its relationship to the organization.

TEAM MEMBERS NEED TO ALIGN PERSONAL AND GROUP GOALS.

It's crucial that people have individual goals as well as team goals. The best results occur when everyone's personal goals reinforce the goals, values, and purpose of the team and the organization.

Creating key performance indicators (KPIs) will help the team evaluate its effectiveness. Such indicators assure that results are measurable, attainable, and manageable.

What Skills Should Team Members Have?

Each person's abilities, knowledge, and talents contribute to the group's success. In addition to any required technical expertise, needed capabilities fall into four types:

1. Interpersonal Skills

To have the necessary interpersonal know-how to succeed as a team member, you must be able to do the following:

- **Resolve** conflicts.
- **Use appropriate negotiating strategies** to create win-win situations.
- **Encourage a diversity of opinions, including disagreements** that are beneficial to the team.
- **Initiate** and participate in problem-solving sessions.
- **Use good communication skills** that include active listening.
- **Provide supportive feedback** to others.

2. Self-Management Skills

- **Establish** personal and group goals.
- **Monitor** progress toward goals, and evaluate results.
- **Plan self-actualization activities** for individuals and the team as a whole.
- **Create** strategic plans, and coordinate tasks that will lead to the fulfillment of these plans.

3. Self-Leadership Skills

Going beyond self-management, self-leadership is your ability to enhance your own efficacy. Defined as your belief in your capacity to execute a particular course of action, self-efficacy is a vital team attribute.

Those with higher levels of self-efficacy try harder to complete a task than those with lower levels and therefore have a better chance of achieving high performance. Gaining self-efficacy requires you to do the following:

- **Use positive thought patterns** to deal with unpleasant team tasks.
- **Reward yourself** when you feel you've done a good job.
- **Provide self-feedback** to correct any missteps and continually improve your mastery of the task at hand.

4. Shared-Leadership Skills

To be a good team member, in addition to the above types of skills, you must:

- **Foster a collaborative approach** to leadership.
- **Step up and lead** when the situation calls for it.

- **Step back and encourage others to lead** when their abilities best fit the task at hand.

When all team members have shared-leadership skills, the right person will come forward to provide direction based on who can best fulfill the group's needs. Everyone in the group will be a leader.

What Roles Can Team Members Take?

Effective teams include people who take on five roles within the team:

1. **Navigators** help the team establish direction and purpose. They ask, "Why do we exist?" and "Where should we be going?" Good navigators provide clear team direction while aligning team goals with those of the organization. Communication and problem-solving skills help a leader succeed in this role.

2. **Engineers** optimize work flow by maximizing each person's contributions. They adapt tasks and processes to fit the environment and resources available. Leadership in this role allows the team to have the right people in the right place at the right time doing the right thing.

3. **Social integrators** answer the question: "How should the team interact when doing its work?" They help the team develop a productive environment through collaborative efforts. When this role is performed successfully, team members will regulate their behavior. They'll establish effective group norms, cohesively build skills, and share member knowledge throughout the team.

4. **Liaisons** connect the team to external stakeholders and groups who control the resources needed for success. They act as advocates and negotiators for sources of material and knowledge. Skillful liaisons create and maintain networks and build relationships between those inside and outside the team.

5. **Coaches** serve as motivators, facilitators, guides, and sounding boards. They help people develop themselves as individuals as well as good team members. The role of coach is especially important when a team first starts out and during transitions, as when people join and leave the team.

One person can take on all these roles if necessary. But the best teams include someone who is best at each of these roles. That's what makes a productive, successful, and high-performing team.

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