

# THE KEY TO BUILDING PRODUCTIVE TEAMS

What makes teams successful? The secret is to focus on goals.

BY DARREL W. RAY

**N**onprofits can't reach their goals of productivity and profitability without building teams to reach those goals. Teams formed without goals will fail. Indeed, a team without goals is not a team.

Goals provide direction and focus—essential keys to a nonprofit's success. Goals are a team's glue, holding team members together, making them accountable for success or failure.

When team members see how goals relate to specific job functions, they focus more intently on reaching those goals. To motivate teams, goals must have the following characteristics:

1. **Goals must be clearly measurable** and time based.
2. **Goals must be publicly known** and displayed for all to see.
3. **All team members must understand** how goals will affect the organization's performance.
4. **Team members must participate** in setting goals and must feel they are realistic.
5. **Goals must be supported by a plan** with milestones so team members can map their progress.
6. **There must be a system** for celebrating goal accomplishment at every level.

Gary Henrie, executive director of South Central Behavioral Services in Kearney, Nebraska, has achieved all the above characteristics so that they paid off handsomely for his organization. At South Central Behavioral Services, it is

apparent that teams work hardest to meet goals when they see the leadership rewarding, recognizing, and supporting goals. If leaders don't support the team approach at every turn, employees will react by saying, "If not them, why me?"

## Compensation and Goal Achievement

When a team reaches its goals, the organization should celebrate. South Central Behavioral Services has "stepping-up awards" and "extra mile awards" that honor team members with financial bonuses for reaching their goals within a prescribed period of time. In such a structure, teams compete against goals, not against one another.

While extra compensation often helps people reach goals, it should be used with caution. Along with compensation, there should be coaching as well.

It is also useful to spend time at staff meetings giving out certificates of achievement. By praising accomplishment and behavior, a message is sent to all employees about what is expected and what is rewarded.

There are two types of goals for which you should reward achievement:

**Task goals** are met when a certain task is completed. Here's an example of a task goal: South Central has teams that will have to process X number of children into foster care each week.

**Process goals** help to improve team skills, motivation, and morale. Process goals include cross-training, goal-setting, and conflict management. A team without process goals is like a

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car running harder and harder, month after month, without having its oil changed. Examples of process goals include the following:

- **All team members will complete** their skill certifications within nine months using the team cross-training plan.
- **Each month, the team will receive** an hour of training to improve conflict management, project planning, performance feedback, or other skills related to the team's mission.

### The Two-year Slump

Many teams fall into a slump after about two years. In their anxiety to keep increasing productivity, they fail to maintain the process that got them there in the first place. Continuous improvement in processes, such as cross-training and skill-building, are just as important as production figures. Without these goals, teams soon stop improving themselves and their processes.

The problem is that managers begin taking teams for granted. They forget to recognize and reinforce goal achievement. Emphasis on celebration decreases. Funds for recognition or reward are reduced or even eliminated. Teams soon learn that achievement and extra effort are ignored or given too little recognition. This essentially cuts off the very life blood of the team process, quickly starving the teams into mediocre performance.

The two-year slump, or some equivalent thereof, seems to happen in all organizations. At first there is great excitement and energy. A great deal of work gets done, and people demonstrate a well-deserved sense of pride. But as soon as the system begins to relax, it starts to lose focus and fall into old habits.

To turn the situation around, there must be a return to basics. The whole organization must look at itself, make adjustments, and ensure that time and energy aren't being wasted through poor habits. To make sure that there is no slump, hold a retreat every two years to assess your progress and make in-course corrections.

It is essential to use process goals to sustain the performance culture. The manager who eliminates critical team processes usually does so in the name of productivity. In the worst-case scenario, the manager who scuttles these processes is long gone—promoted or transferred—before the damage is recognized. When this happens, the system may sustain permanent and irreversible damage. Teams that have been asked to do

more without proper tools, skills, or infrastructure support soon become bitter and resentful.

When new managers come in with no knowledge or training in the system, they may be able to get immediate improvements in productivity. In doing so, however, they can violate the basic structures, including training and process improvement systems, that were in place. Such managers ensure that the wheels will fall off the team at their departure. They will leave behind bitter workers who refuse to participate in process improvement initiatives.

Successful managers, by contrast, are stewards to human resources. They take responsibility for morale and skill development as well as quality and productivity. They help foster an ownership mentality in everyone.

Process goals are an essential way to ensure that people resources are properly stewarded. Process goals keep managers focused on developing people. People who are being actively developed do not feel rented. They see the organization investing in them and respond with feelings of ownership.

South Central Behavioral Services makes its employees feel like partners in success, rewarding them for increased revenues. One team, for example, received a \$23,000 award for its contribution to the organization's increased success.

When successful teams are in place, managers can devote time to planning rather than conflict resolution and supervisory duties. The result is a surge in efficiency, productivity, profitability, and goal achievement. ■

#### Resources

- "Build a Powerful Staff Team," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 18, No. 4.
- Haber, Jeffrey, "Bonus: Not a Dirty Word," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 13, No. 2.
- Lauer, Larry, "Using Your Organization's Culture to Build Productivity," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 11, No. 6.
- McKay, Shona, "Building Morale: The Key to Successful Change," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 13, No. 3.
- Muehrcke, Jill, ed., *Personnel and Human Resources Development, Leadership Series*.

These resources are available from the Society's Resource Center, [www.snpo.org](http://www.snpo.org).

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