

How to get people with diverse backgrounds to rally together for a common cause.

Turn Team Conflict into Team Harmony

By Dave Zielinski

Ask anyone who's ever been part of a work team to recount the experience and you're likely to hear a jumble of adjectives, such as *rewarding, exasperating, fulfilling and challenging*. Despite the long experience most of us have in serving on project or permanent

teams – be it in school, on the playing fields or in the office – “team member” is a role that continues to test us like no other. Consider the challenge: Teams require people with often wildly-diverse backgrounds, work styles and belief systems to set aside differences and suddenly start “rowing together as one.” And in many cases they're asked to do so under the guidance of team leaders with considerable technical or subject matter expertise, but little aptitude, expertise or formal training in how to manage and motivate psychologically complex human beings.

Good teamwork, it seems, remains as elusive as ever. The good news is that there's plenty organizations can do to ensure their work teams join the ranks of the high-performing and well-adjusted and avoid the fate of the chronically underachieving and dysfunctional.

The Effective Team Leader

Much of the extensive literature written about effective teamwork focuses on the team leader as the arbiter of team success or failure. Subject matter expertise has long



been acknowledged as a prerequisite for leading well, but today there's growing recognition of the importance of “soft” interpersonal skills in building high-performing work teams. To truly succeed, teambuilding experts say, leaders must be adept not only at establishing strategy and clear performance objectives, but at integrating difficult personalities within the team framework and embracing rather than shunning the conflict that inevitably arises in group settings.

Much of what makes team leaders successful isn't rocket science but rather common sense applied with diligence and persistence. Some of the best ways for team leaders to motivate employees, boost performance and engender commitment, for example, are both simple and daunting. They start with becoming more empathetic listeners, taking an interest in fellow human beings and yet still insisting on full accountability. Teambuilding consultants say one of the hardest things for team leaders is to simply sit down and talk with their people – many would prefer to do anything else but. Yet the payoffs of such small actions can be powerful and far-reaching.



A team's chances of sustained success grows immeasurably when:

- Leaders combine those people skills with the ability to set precise and measurable team objectives.
- Provide regular (and actionable) performance feedback.
- Promote peer pressure as the ultimate accountability mechanism.
- Reward team members for good performance in ways that are meaningful to them, not just to the organization.

Effective team leaders also understand the different skills and actions required of them during the four stages of team development – the phases of forming, storming, norming and performing first identified by Dr. Bruce Tuckman in 1965:

- The *forming* stage requires extra direction and guidance from leaders while team members feel out their new roles and responsibilities.
- *Storming* demands that leaders be resolute and goal-focused as team members jockey for position, form cliques and challenge the leader.
- *Norming*, where roles and processes grow clearer and begin to normalize, requires deft facilitation skills and more shared leadership approaches.
- *Performing* requires even greater delegation as a maturing team grows more autonomous, strategically aware and capable of functioning on its own.

Clarity, Trust and Accountability

One of the biggest reasons that teams of any stripe struggle is a lack of clarity around group and individual goals and roles. Without a clear idea of what's expected of them, of what their specific role is on a team and of what, for

Leading Volunteer-Based Teams

Managing teams that consist largely of volunteers, as is the case with many Toastmaster clubs, often presents a different set of challenges to team leaders than leading paid staff. Volunteers in general tend to be a passionate and self-directed bunch, and because of their non-paid status a "command and control" management style often is anathema to motivating and managing them effectively. Leadership experts say a more participatory or inclusive leadership style, but one that still holds people accountable for results, is usually a better fit for volunteer-based teams.

"Volunteers' passion and willfulness can be a formidable combination when a manager comes along," says Loretta Donovan, president of Worksmarts, a learning solutions strategy company in New York City that has worked extensively in volunteer-based organizations.

While much of the advice for managing paid staff applies to volunteers – establish clear objectives and set precise expectations, communicate frequently about progress toward goals, hold people accountable for results – it often needs to be refined or emphasized with volunteer-based teams, Donovan says. For example, team leaders may want to put extra effort into recognizing volunteers' efforts in meaningful ways and seek more input from them on key decisions. The latter represents the difference between "enlisting" and "commanding," she says.

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Is Your Team Crashing and Burning?

Look to these five common causes

In his bestselling book *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable*, management consultant Patrick Lencioni identifies five problems that commonly undermine teams. These are issues, excerpted here, that both team leaders and team members must work together to address:

1 Absence of trust. Team members who are not genuinely open with one another about their mistakes and weaknesses make it impossible to build a foundation of trust. "It is only when team members are truly comfortable being exposed to one another that they begin to act without concern for protecting themselves," Lencioni says. "As a result, they can focus their energy completely on the job at hand rather than on being strategically disingenuous or political with one another."

2 Fear of conflict. Too often teams sweep conflict under the rug for fear of face-to-face confrontation or upsetting others, dooming themselves to dealing with the same problems over and over. A better approach is unbridled but respectful debate that brings issues affecting performance or productivity into the light of day. "Teams that engage in productive conflict know the only purpose is to produce the best possible solution in the shortest period of time," says Lencioni. "They discuss and resolve issues more quickly and completely than others, and emerge with no residual feelings of collateral damage, but with an eagerness and readiness to take on the next important issue."

3 Lack of commitment. This happens when all team members fail to buy in or commit to decisions made by the group, badmouthing or undermining decisions even after they've signed off on them. "Great teams find ways to achieve buy-in even when complete agreement is impossible," says Lencioni. "They understand that reasonable human beings do not always need to get their way in order to support a decision, but only need to know their opinions have been heard and considered."

4 Avoidance of accountability. This occurs when team leaders or team members fail to call others on actions and behaviors that undermine the team. "Team members who are particularly close to one another sometimes hesitate to hold one another accountable precisely because they fear jeopardizing a valuable personal relationship," says Lencioni. "Ironically, this only causes the relationship to deteriorate, as team members begin to resent one another for not living up to expectations and for allowing standards to erode." Members of great teams, he says, ignore these natural tendencies and choose instead to "enter the danger" with each other.

5 Inattention to results. This happens when team members put their individual needs above the collective goals of the team. Some may focus on enhancing their own positions or career prospects at the expense of the team. In other cases, Lencioni says, some teams simply aren't results-focused in any sense. "They do not live and breathe in order to achieve meaningful objectives, but rather to merely exist or survive. Unfortunately for these groups no amount of trust, conflict, commitment or accountability can compensate for a lack of desire to win."

Excerpted with permission from *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, (Jossey-Bass 2002)

example, separates mediocre from excellent performance team members rarely perform up to their potential.

"Team members might know what the organization's purpose is, but they often are less certain about their own role or purpose and why what they do is important to someone else on their team," says Gary Lear, president of Resource Development Systems, a performance improvement consulting firm in Lake City, Florida.

Indeed, vague performance objectives have undermined far more work teams than factors like too much individualism or poor communication, experts say. Teams with specific goals, like "resolving customer problems in one contact 90 percent of the time" or "shipping 95 percent of orders within 24 hours," rather than "improving customer satisfaction," often will perform better – especially if

progress toward those goals is diligently measured and communicated.

"If there is one thing that everyone is clear about, it's that successful, high-performing teams have clear performance objectives and unsuccessful teams do not," says Glenn Parker, a team building consultant based in Skillman, New Jersey, and author of the best-selling book *Cross-Functional Teams*.

It's also clear that teams won't go far without trust and accountability – two shopworn terms that nonetheless remain the lifeblood of team success. Lear encourages organizations to think about trust as more than just "reliability," but rather creating environments where team members feel comfortable opening up and showing some vulnerability without fear of retribution. "There are things that

increase *trustworthiness* – people arriving to work on time or playing by rules, for example – that don't necessarily build a deeper level of trust" on a team, he says. Lear uses the acronym *SOAR* to capture all the elements needed to build real trust: straightforwardness, openness, acceptance (of others' differences) and reliability.

In his book *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, author Patrick Lencioni says teams with an absence of trust conceal their weaknesses and mistakes from one another, hesitate to ask for help or provide constructive feedback, rarely offer help outside their areas of responsibility and jump to conclusions about the intentions and aptitudes of team mates. Establishing this kind of trust doesn't happen easily, Lencioni writes, and requires "a leader who shows some of his or her own genuine (not staged) vulnerability, shared experiences over time, multiple instances of follow-through and demonstrated credibility and an in-depth understanding of the unique attributes of team members." (For more advice from the book, see the article, *Is Your Team Crashing and Burning?* on page 12).

The Power of Conflict

We tend to view teams that are chummy and exhibit few outward signs of conflict or discord as role models of sorts. But appearances can be deceiving. If such teams avoid tackling tough issues and engaging in passionate debate due to a fear of conflict – if the desire to avoid personal confrontation trumps all – they risk sweeping under the rug problems that can return to bite them time and again. Experts say many high-performing teams learn to embrace *productive* conflict – the kind centered on strategic or tactical concepts or ideas, not personality or political matters – as a way of resolving difficult issues faster and finding more creative, well-rounded solutions.

"Telling people they need to just 'rise above and live with' an existing conflict in most cases is a cop out," says Barb North, a conflict resolution expert with Win-Win Training in Woodland Hills, California. The trick, North says, is to ensure work teams have the right tools and training to engage in productive rather than toxic debate. That starts with creating a formal conflict resolution plan, then allowing team members to role-play common conflict scenarios in low-pressure training situations before dealing with the real thing in the workplace.

When teams get bogged down in conflict, it's usually not out of malice but because they lack the proper mindset and a structured, systematic process for addressing contentious issues, North says. For example, many workplace conflicts are escalated needlessly because people are drawn into them who shouldn't be involved. Consider the team leader who starts to hear rumblings about one team member who isn't pulling his weight.

The leader's first instinct might be to gather more information by talking to all members of the team about the situation. But North says that often just fans the flames – it's far better to address the "accused" directly before consulting

the team. "You want to ask if there's anything going on with this person that you're not seeing," North says. "It could be they have an ailing parent at home, have experienced a recent death in the family or have financial or health issues themselves. It also could be that they're simply not suited for a particular job, and that their talents might blossom in another role. The approach some managers take of, 'first I am going to investigate you, then later I'll sit down and talk to you about the problem' is getting it backwards."

People often keep conflict alive and festering rather than working quickly through it because they're not fully aware of its costs, North says. "There can be financial costs to conflict, but just as often there are emotional costs, health costs and costs to family and friends who have to deal with the fallout of conflict you're engaged in at work," she says. "Too often people simply stay in a state of conflict rather than take the time to really analyze it and ask themselves, 'Is it really worth paying the price I'm paying for this stalemate?'"

She also says there's a common misconception that the only way to resolve conflicts is through a "50-50" compromise, which more often than not leaves both parties unsatisfied. A more thorough investigation of needs on both sides can lead to more "win-win" solutions. Case in point is an anecdote from the negotiation skills book *Getting to Yes* by Roger Fisher and William Ury. A mother walks into a kitchen to find her two sons arguing over possession of an orange and cuts it in half to end the argument. But neither child is satisfied. It turns out one son simply wanted the orange for its rind to make cookies and the other wanted it for the juice to

"Experts say many high-performing teams learn to embrace productive conflict."

drink. "What Mom forgot to do was ask the question: 'Why do you want the orange?'" North says. "We are so conditioned to think either I get what I want, or you get what you want, or we have to compromise and we only get part of what we want. But a deeper exploration of issues and options on both sides can create more win-win solutions."

Leading Virtual Teams

More of today's managers also find themselves leading teams with whom they have little or no physical contact. These "virtual" teams feature employees working together from geographically-dispersed locations on a project or permanent basis, conducting most of their business via the phone, e-mail, webconferencing and videoconferencing.

Leading virtual teams requires significant adjustments from managers accustomed to employees working underfoot, a challenge that can be magnified if the team is scat-

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tered over multiple time zones, is culturally diverse or team members speak English as a second language.

For example, it can be easy for virtual team members to feel isolated and lose their sense of direction when they're distanced from others, so checking in frequently by phone or e-mail becomes more important for managers, as does providing regular performance feedback. To address this, many virtual team leaders hold mandatory weekly conference calls to create group cohesiveness and keep everyone on the same wavelength. Teambuilding consultant Glenn Parker encourages virtual teams to hold face-to-face kickoff meetings when they form and then meet at least once a year in person if possible. Starting a dialogue, putting faces to names and getting to know teammates helps later if problems arise, Parker says.

Effective virtual teams also create ground rules around use of technology, their communications lifeline. Some team leaders require that all e-mails be answered within 24 hours, for example, and many establish protocol on what kinds of e-mail can be sent to whom, so people don't get flooded with unnecessary messages.

Others set a goal of posting a meeting agenda 48 hours before an online meeting or phone conference so everyone has time to contribute to the agenda and prepare for the meeting. "It's critical to establish norms for communicating and making decisions in a virtual world that are based on the team members' unique situations, backgrounds, experience and work assignments," says Parker.

Recipe for Team Success

Teamwork will always be a fabric of organizational life. As long as people with different backgrounds and belief systems come together under the banner of "team," there will be disagreement and conflict. But the sooner that organizations embrace the value of productive, face-to-face confrontation as a means of finding the best solutions in the smallest amount of time, and recognize the simple power of leaders taking a personal interest in their team members, setting precise performance objectives and holding people accountable for results, the more effective they'll see their work teams become.

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