Teamwork: Tips for Managers

Today, in most organizations, people work in teams or groups. That means managers must be skilled not only in managing individuals, but also in managing groups. Your goal as a manager is to build a high performing team -- where people do their work, do it well, and respect and support one another. To achieve this, you must work to foster teamwork and collaboration among the people you manage on an ongoing basis.

Fostering teamwork and collaboration

- *Choose and hire the right people for the right roles.* All members of your team should have the skills necessary to perform their jobs. When there are skills gaps, the whole team suffers. When people have the right mix of skills, the team thrives.

- *Get to know each member of your team.* Take the time to get to know people's interests and values, and the special needs of each member of your group. Do this in both individual and group meetings. Use some of the time when the team is together just to talk in a relaxed and open way about anything that's on their minds, whether it's related to work or not.

- *Agree on a mission for your group.* Your mission should include specific goals and objectives that line up with the organization's goals. Getting broad participation in goal setting can help employees understand how their work contributes to the organization's success.

- *Play to people's strengths.* Give team members work that uses their skills and talents. To the extent you can, avoid assigning work that allows anyone to be a drag on the team.

- *Promote idea sharing by subtly managing discussion so that everyone participates.* You'll notice that team members will be more or less outgoing according to their personalities and confidence level. A gentle prod can help: "Brenda, what did you think of the last set of changes we made?"

- *Reward the team and reward individuals.* "Rewards should encourage people to work together," writes Terry Bragg in Occupational Hazards. Here is Bragg's advice:
  - Don't limit rewards to select groups, and don't forget supporting players.
  - Reward everyone who contributes to the achievement of your organization's goals.
  - Reward the team, but don't forget to also reward individuals for high performance.

- *Make teamwork one of the criteria on annual performance reviews.* "Companies that want to encourage teamwork need to recognize employees who collaborate readily with others," writes Carol Hymowitz in "Teamwork Fosters Faster Solutions Than Going Solo" (Wall Street Journal, September 20, 2005). "That means making teamwork one of the criteria on employee performance reviews."

- *Spend time building team relationships.* Bring people together often to discuss the work, but sometimes in a more casual atmosphere. You could use the occasional pizza lunch or a meeting held outdoors to perk people up and get them talking in a different way, without disrupting their schedules.

The "nitty-gritty" of leading teams
A big part of your job is to make clear how decisions will be made, who will be responsible for what, and how you will resolve differences as a group. Michael Feiner calls this the "nitty-gritty of leading teams" in his book *The Feiner Points of Leadership* (Warner Books, 2004). Here are some suggestions from Feiner and other experts:

- *Establish ground rules.* How will decisions get made? Who reports to whom? When does the team make decisions and when do they escalate issues to management.

- *Be sure tasks and roles are clearly defined and assigned.* Which tasks will be shared? By whom? Who will be responsible for which projects? Who needs to attend which meetings?

- *Talk as a group about how the work will get done.* Agree on deadlines and a work plan.

- *Be fair.* It's your job as a manager to balance the needs of the group with individuals' schedules, work loads, and responsibilities. Also, if workloads are perceived as unfair, resentments will build.

- *Discuss how differences will be expressed and resolved.* Establish and agree on ground rules together. For example, your team might agree that "we won't sulk or go behind one another's backs when there is a problem in the group. We will try to talk through our differences together."

- *Work with each team member to set individual goals* that will also help the team reach its shared goals.

- *Involve individuals and the group in establishing goals, priorities, deadlines, and processes as much as possible.*

- *Provide ongoing feedback both to individuals and to the entire team.* Every member of the team should be held accountable.

Performance problems

If an employee's performance is affecting others on the team, it is a performance issue that you need to address. You may have an employee who is an otherwise good or excellent performer who is experiencing problems outside work and whose performance is slipping. Or you may have an employee whose poor performance or difficult behavior is affecting other members of the group.

Here are steps to take:

- *Do not assume a problem with an employee will go away.* It's best to address problems early on, before they get out of hand or affect the group.

- *If an employee is struggling to perform key aspects of the job, don't ignore or work around the problem.* The job may not be a good fit with that employee's skills. If training can't bring an employee up to an acceptable standard of performance, you'll have to deal with that as a performance problem. Keep in mind that personal issues that may have nothing to do with work sometimes affect performance; it may be appropriate to remind the employee how to contact the employee assistance program (EAP). Contact HR or the program that provided this publication for resources and support.

- *Don't hesitate to ask for help if you're not sure how to handle the problem or talk with the employee.* Contact the program that provided this publication or your HR representative for coaching and guidance. As with any performance problem, it's important that you follow your organization's procedures for dealing with the situation fairly but firmly.

Interpersonal conflict

Working in teams has many pluses, including opportunities for brainstorming and sharing work and information. It also presents challenges, including the potential for people problems and interpersonal conflict. Studies show that for groups of people to work together effectively, they must help one another, coordinate activities, and resolve problems openly and respectfully.

Teams that aren't performing well, or where there is conflict, may exhibit some of the following signs:

- decreased productivity
- conflicts among group members
- tension at team meetings
- an increase in complaints among staff members or among those outside the department
- confusion about work assignments or people's roles
- return to old patterns or attitudes

- a lack of trust
- lopsided participation, so that one or some team members participate very actively while others seem passive, uninterested, or withdrawn

If interpersonal conflict is getting in the way of your group's success and productivity, seek help. Contact your HR representative, your manager, or the program that provided this publication for resources and support.

Virtual teamwork

At more than half of companies today, some employees work off-site, on the road, or from home. This number is increasing every year, as technology makes it possible to work from practically anywhere. Here are ways to stay productive and cohesive as a group when some or many of your members may work in different locations:

- *Establish regular times to get together as a group.* Along with your regular team meetings, which people may attend from different locations, try to set up a regular time for people to get together in person if at all possible. This helps cement personal, working, and group relationships. Have social get-togethers, too, which are a valuable way to foster teamwork.

- *Encourage people to share information.* Encourage people to call each other, share tips and resources, and offer support to one another.

- *Make sure all employees receive the same memos in a timely manner*, including FYIs, handouts, information about benefits, invitations to social events, announcements of company meetings and training events, and so on.

- *Make sure everyone has access to necessary documents and communications in a shared database*.

- *Be sure people have the tools and technology they need to share information and work together*. Be sure they know how to use these tools, which may include Outlook scheduling, teleconference technology, intranet tools, Webcasts, etc.

- *Include virtual employees in on-site events.* Be sure they are invited to celebrations and other events.

Taking care of your team

Taking care of your team boils down to one thing: offering support when individuals or the group need it.

- *Pitch in and lend a hand.* Help out during crunch times or when people need assistance or support with a task or project. Provide direction as needed. Encourage group members to reach out and help one another. Make sure people have the tools, information, and resources they need to get the job done. Help

individuals and the group keep priorities in focus. Intercede as necessary to remove organizational obstacles to the team's progress.

- *Communicate often about common visions and goals.* Working together toward a shared vision helps keep teams strong. Take care of your team by regularly reminding group members what your common goals and purpose are.

- *Personalize team meetings.* Part of what employees look forward to in team or group meetings is the opportunity to talk with each other about current projects, developments at work, and their personal lives. Include time in regular meetings for people to make these personal connections. They help a team function positively and productively.

- *Reward your group often and thoughtfully.* Make the most of whatever company reward programs exist, and make sure employees know about them. Offer recognition at regular team meetings, or in private, as appropriate. This is the least glamorous but probably most motivating form of recognition. Avoid cramming special recognition in at the end or beginning of a busy meeting. Make sure there's plenty of time and that people are paying attention.

- *Take time out to have some fun with your team.* Encourage team activities like potluck lunches or quarterly celebrations. Have a team meeting outdoors if possible. Plan activities that are not connected to work performance. Go off-site for a day and engage in team-building exercises and discussions to build a stronger team.