Twelve Ways to Build an Effective Team

Overview

Twelve ways to build a team that works together productively and with synergy.

Teams that are cohesive, productive, and efficient -- and whose members enjoy doing their work and working together -- don't happen by accident. Successful teams are cohesive because team members work cooperatively, sharing common goals as well as the resources to achieve them. They are productive, not because team members never disagree, but because they have worked out ways to resolve conflicts when they occur. They are efficient because tasks are assigned in a way that takes into account each member's skills and interests, rather than letting the team be dominated by the most verbal, most aggressive, or most popular personalities. Managers play an essential role in developing and leading teams that work in these ways.

Here are 12 ways to build an effective and cohesive team:

1. *Clarify the common goals and purposes.* Make the team's purposes clear. Take the time to articulate the team's performance goals and how the team contributes to the company's success. Even a work group that has existed for some time may never have done this. In any case, the purposes and conditions change over time. If you are a new boss, you will be putting your own stamp on the group's common goal.

2. *Clarify each person's role in achieving the common purpose.* Define each person's job in terms of its contribution to the group's and the company's overall goals. This must be done in specific terms, not in vague generalities. For example, "We're working under very tight timelines. Joe, you'll be in charge of overall project coordination, so you will set the timetable for each project phase. Betty, can I ask you to take responsibility for writing the brochures and getting them printed? Maribeth and Scott, I'd like you to work together on the transportation requirements, OK? Let's meet again tomorrow afternoon at 3:00 for an update and a progress check. Does that work for everybody?"

3. *Put team members in touch with the people who use what they do.* Confirm the needs of the team's external or internal customers or clients on an ongoing basis. For example, "Tom, be sure to talk with both Materials Management and the folks in Production to make sure they're aware of the changes we've planned. Our changes could affect their work if we're all not in sync."

4. *Pay attention to conflicts when they arise.* It's natural for conflict to arise when people work in groups. Conflict, handled well, can actually produce constructive ideas. Sometimes team members will annoy each other, step on each other's toes, or hurt each other's feelings. Honest disagreements can become personal and heated. Work processes that seemed efficient can break down. It's important to recognize that some degree of conflict among co-workers is normal. Let problems come to the surface. Avoid the impulse to demand that your employees "drop it," "forget about it," or "just cut it out." Also, anticipate that more conflicts may occur whenever there are changes that affect the team's membership or goals.

5. *Work out ways to resolve conflicts.* What works as an effective style of conflict resolution varies from team to team, and may vary over time on the same team. Teams whose members all have similar experience and seniority may be able to settle problems more informally, for example, than a team with more diversity. Here are some ways to successfully resolve conflicts:

   - Make sure each team member involved has a chance to explain the problem as he or she sees it.

   - Establish clear ground rules so that people can have their say without being interrupted, rushed, mocked, or intimidated.

   - Encourage employees to solve problems themselves when they can so that you aren't always in the middle of every conflict between team members. However, if they cannot solve them, it's important that they can count on you to coach them through a problem-solving framework that allows them to build conflict resolution skills for the future.

6. *Remember your leadership role.* While you need to encourage your employees to feel a healthy "ownership" of the team's work, you need to avoid trying to be "just one of the team." You -- not your team -- are the one accountable to your own boss for the team's results. You're expected to get results through your people. Hold each employee responsible for meeting goals and for solving or helping to solve problems.

7. *Make sure team members interact at meetings.* Do team members mainly address their questions and suggestions to you, or do they interact directly with each other at meetings? Encourage team members to ask each other for help and to offer it to each other, without channeling it all through you. Synergy on teams is achieved when team members feel comfortable speaking up with suggestions that build on the creativity of other team members. This requires collaboration not competition. Dominance of a group by a manager or supervisor can limit the chances a group has to achieve real synergy. Also, competition within the team may increase as members vie for the manager's attention.

8. *Allow team members to have input into their jobs.* When you can, give your employees flexibility on how they meet their work goals. Encourage employees to make suggestions about changes in what they do and how they do it, based on their direct and daily experience of what works, what doesn't work, and what could work better. Of course, the only way to encourage employees to make suggestions over the long run is to show them that you will act on some of their suggestions.

9. *Make sure there is room for minority or unpopular views.* Teams can easily slip into "group think," especially when they are successful. Those who see flaws in the way the group does things, or who see improvements that could be made, may be politely ignored or even treated with hostility. Teams where this happens can fail when their environment or requirements change and they can't adapt. Effective managers build team trust by encouraging a diversity of opinion. Ask, specifically, for other viewpoints. Inquiring into views that may not have been spoken can allow better team performance. By asking the team, "What else do we need to consider here?" you allow perspectives not yet considered to be put on the table and evaluated. Those in the majority must be able to trust that those who disagree do so honestly and with good intentions. Those in the minority must be able to trust that they can speak up without being punished or left out.

10. *Appraise and reward the team as a whole.* As with an individual performance review, compare the team's performance to what was expected of it. Plan small celebrations of the team achieving important milestones. Acknowledgments of incremental successes can be more motivating than big end-of-project rewards. Celebrations could range from pizza at lunch, to dinner at a nice restaurant, to a bonus, or to a congratulatory letter from a senior executive that goes in each employee's personnel file. Keep in mind that the team review can never take the place of individual performance reviews.

11. *Appraise and reward each employee individually, including a review of his or her teamwork.* As members of a team, the expectations and criteria for their performance include showing a spirit of cooperation, developing conflict-resolution skills, engaging in good communication with others, and being willing to help others solve problems or get through crunch efforts. If feasible, encourage all team members to provide meaningful feedback to one another. Be sure to give each team member specific feedback about his or her strengths and any unique role that the person served on the team rather than just focusing on problems or performance gaps.

12. *Communicate team successes.* If possible, let the whole company know what your team has accomplished. Include a specific description of what you did, why it's important to the company, and what challenges had to be overcome. Name people who made key contributions, including those outside your

group. Be sure to include those who are usually left out of such acknowledgments, such as the receptionist who handled the flood of calls after a successful public relations effort or the information technology people who installed the complex software you used.

Remember, a work group begins to become a team when employees see their jobs not merely as what they are supposed to do individually but as contributions to the group's overall success. By following the tips in this article, managers can ensure that their work team develops the synergy needed to move a work group to a new level of cooperation and productivity.