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Jan 1, 2007

Building and Leading High Performance Teams

You don't have to be Michael Jordan or Mia Hamm to have the skills you need to build and lead high performing teams

When a sports team is working well together, it can feel like magic. We've all experienced it, either as a team member or as a fan. Fortunately, you do not have to be Michael Jordan or Mia Hamm to have the skills you need to build and lead high performing teams in your organization.

An important leadership competency for any size organization, the ability to build and lead high performing teams is especially critical in small-to-midsize businesses. Here, people must work closely together, wear many hats and work effectively across the organization to get tasks accomplished quickly enough to remain competitive.

In order to understand the competencies needed to build and lead high performance teams, it is helpful to first define a team. Here is a simple but effective description from *The Wisdom of Teams* (Harvard Business School Press, 1993.)

"A team is a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable."

Using this definition, we can outline three important competencies for the effective team builder and leader.

- **Promoting understanding** of why a group of people need to be a team. The team needs to understand its shared goals and what each team member brings to the team that is relevant and crucial to its overall successes.
- **Ensuring the team has adequate knowledge** to accomplish its task. This includes information relevant to the team's goals and individual job competencies.
- **Facilitating effective interaction** in such as way as to ensure good problem solving, decision making and coordination of

effort.

Characteristics of Highly Effective Teams

To better understand how these competencies create effective teams, let's examine some characteristics of highly effective teams.

An effective team understands the big picture. In an effective team, each team member understands the context of the team's work to the greatest degree possible. That includes understanding the relevance of his or her job and how it impacts the effectiveness of others and the overall team effort. Too often, people are asked to work on part of a task without being told how their role contributes to the desired end result, much less how their efforts are impacting the ability of others to do their work. Understanding the big picture promotes collaboration, increases commitment and improves quality.

An effective team has common goals. Effective teams have agreed-upon goals that are simple, measurable and clearly relevant to the team's task. Each goal includes key measurable metrics (that are available to everyone on the team), which can be used to determine the team effectiveness and improvement. Understanding and working toward these common goals as a unit is crucial to the team's effectiveness.

An effective team works collaboratively, as a unit. In an effective team you'll notice a penchant for collaboration and a keen awareness of interdependency. Collaboration and a solid sense of interdependency in a team will defuse blaming behavior and stimulate opportunities for learning and improvement. Without this sense of interdependency in responsibility and reward, blaming behaviors can occur which will quickly erode team effectiveness.

The Roles of the Effective Team Leader

In order to encourage this level of collaboration and interdependency, the team leader must provide the necessary support and structure for the team, starting with putting together the right people. Team members should be selected and their tasks assigned with their natural skills in mind. Not every person is capable of doing every job.

The team must also have the resources and training required to develop the skills needed to do their jobs. This includes cross-training. Cross-training gives team members a greater awareness of how their jobs are interdependent, increasing the team's flexibility and improving response time.

The quality of the team's response is highly dependent on the timeliness of the feedback received from the team's leader, other team members and customers. Receiving timely feedback is crucial to the effectiveness of the team. The effective team leader ensures that feedback reaches the entire team on its goals and metrics, as well as feedback to each individual team member. This feedback must be received in time to make adjustments and corrections. Often, feedback is received too late to have any practical value in the moment, and consequently, it feels like criticism. While it might be useful for future planning, it does not promote immediate corrections in performance.

Feedback is a form of constructive communication, another necessary tool in the effective team leader's tool chest. No matter how traditional or innovative the work design, consistent and constructive communication throughout the team is essential. The act of constructive communication can do more than anything else to improve quality and productivity. Timely and appropriately delivered feedback can make the difference between a team that hides mistakes and a team that sees mistakes as opportunities.

When a team views mistakes as opportunities for improving the team's process and results, it's a sign that the team leader has successfully created an environment that promotes problem-solving. People are problem solvers by nature. When they are allowed to create their own solutions (rather than having expert solutions imposed upon them) team members are more proactive and engaged. Teams also have greater ownership of solutions they discover for themselves.

Creating an environment that promotes problem-solving is part of creating an effective team structure. Poor team structure can actually create negative, ineffective behaviors in individuals and impede communication. The responsibility for poor performance is usually a

function of the team structure rather than individual incompetence; yet, it is individuals who are sent to human resources or training programs for fixing. If team members feel like they are pitted against one another to compete for rewards and recognition, they will withhold information that might be useful to the greater team. When a team has problems, the effective team leader will focus on the team's structure before focusing on individuals.

Conclusion

Remember: a "willingness" to participate collaboratively as a team member does not guarantee the desired outcome. People thrown into a collaborative situation, especially those without experience operating in this mode, need assistance to guarantee success. Managers who are skeptical of team participation to begin with often throw their people into an unplanned, unstructured decision-making process, responding with "I told you so" as they watch their team flounder.

By contrast, managers who focus on promoting good understanding, ensuring adequate knowledge and facilitating effective interaction, will watch the transformation of their job from one that required constant supervision, fire-fighting, and oversight, to one that allows the leader to focus on serving the needs of the team and each individual team member.