

Practical Advice for Creating Dynamic, Effective Teams

It's time for a memory test. Think for a moment about the finest team you've ever been a part of: one that performed exceptionally well, improved its operations over time and whose members came away from the experience professionally fulfilled, wiser and more skilled.

Now think about the so-called "Dream Team," the 2004 men's Olympic basketball team. Most fans thought they were a shoo-in for the gold medal in Athens, Greece. The group was loaded with National Basketball Association players and coaches, but it failed to achieve its objectives, instead bringing home a bronze medal. Its coaches and members never worked cohesively to improve the team's performance, and it came away from the experience more frustrated than fulfilled.

Why did your team thrive and the Olympic team disappoint? The answer is simple: critical team dynamics. Your team had them and the Dream Team didn't.

A dynamic team is an effective team, but what makes a group truly dynamic?



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Whether the team is operating a biodiesel plant or company or functioning on the basketball court, complex factors ranging from the level of interdependence among members to contextual conditions in which the team operates can either enhance or erode team dynamics. Ultimately, all these factors combine to determine the team's success or failure.

How do you build and manage a real Dream Team that is dynamic and effective? The following are practical suggestions for you or the team leader who reports to you.

Is a Team Needed?

Teamwork isn't right for every project. So before you begin forming a crew to tackle the latest project, first determine if it meets the following criteria. First, the project is clearly defined, and you know how to get it done. Second, the job requires constant collaboration to solve problems and complete work. Third, determine that a proven leader is available to spearhead the effort.

If the project does not meet these requirements, another work model (e.g., individuals reporting back to a leader) may prove more efficient for completing it.

Assemble Team Members

Once you're sure the project will best be accomplished with a real team, it's time

to choose the right individuals for the job. First, designate a leader. Every successful team needs a strong leader at the helm—one that communicates well, has experience handling teamwork issues and understands the project and key roles. If the right leader isn't already on the staff, hire one before the project begins or take on the leadership role yourself.

Second, select the right team members. When drafting a team, look beyond job skills. Choose people with diverse skills and personalities. Some members should be strong "soldiers," or internal cooperators with great interpersonal skills who get work done. Others should be "boundary spanners," or individuals adept at accessing people, resources and fresh ideas from outside the group.

Third, limit the group size to 10 or 12. When it comes to teams, smaller is better. Ten is a good number for maintaining high-quality communication, clarity of purpose and role, as well as personal investment in the team's success.

Finally, focus on critical cooperation, not friendship. Team members don't have to be best friends to work well together. In fact, creative energy and innovation are often fueled by a modicum of conflict. Just make sure the team leader fosters a culture of respect and open communication, and limits conflict to relevant professional issues.

Ensure Conditions for Optimum Performance

No matter how talented the individual team members, develop and exploit their synergies to maximize their effectiveness. To help the team succeed, make sure it has the following. It must first have authenticity. A bona fide team has clear boundaries, interdependence among members and at least moderate stability of membership over time.

Success also requires a compelling and clear purpose. All team members should work toward the same higher goal. Members must have clearly defined roles. Each member should understand his or her responsibilities and respect the rights and roles of teammates.

A successful team needs an enabling structure. The team's tasks, composition and conduct norms must enhance-not impede-work. Clear channels of communication must be established and a supportive social context must exist where the resources and support necessary to complete collective work are available.

Success also requires consistent reviews and feedback mechanisms. For the team to operate efficiently, continually monitor progress to build on what's working and fix what isn't.

Finally, competent coaching is a key. The team leader must be capable and willing to help members get through rough spots or take advantage of emerging opportunities.

Meet the Social, Interpersonal Needs

Unless everyone on your team is named Asimo (the name of Honda's advanced motion humanoid robot), remember that each team member shows up for work each day as a whole person, bringing his or her thoughts, emotions and insecurities. Help keep team members working well together by motivation. Inspire team members by showing sincere appreciation for their hard work. Make sure comments are specific, timely and public, if possible. Recognize individual and team successes.

Address interpersonal conflicts early and tactfully. Stick with the process until the conflict is resolved. Build trust among members with team-building activities and events. Give them opportunities for extra social time together in an atmosphere conducive to open communication.

Hire People with Team-Oriented Attributes

Hiring team-oriented people is, obviously, essential to creating a dynamic team. However, figuring out how to identify a team player may not be so obvious. If you need to hire people for the next team initiative, look for personal qualities that allow for team leadership and team players. A team leader should understand the conditions that influence a team's effectiveness, enjoy problem solving, possess excellent communication skills, be emotionally mature and have enough personal courage to move outside his or her comfort zone for the sake of achieving the team's objective.

Team players should be reliable, a constructive communicator, an active listener, cooperative and flexible.

Beyond these attributes, bear in mind the cultural impact of adding a new element to the current team's dynamic (e.g., will this recruit contribute to an unhealthy level of competition in the team, or bring people together to solve problems?). While none of us has a hiring crystal ball, you can preserve or enhance a thriving team dynamic by hiring people who fit into your corporate culture.