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Building Effective Leadership Teams

Why do some leadership teams succeed while others, even with apparently able leaders, fail?

The reasons some teams fail are varied, but the characteristics of high-performance leadership teams are a blueprint for success. Five fundamental principles underpin successful leadership teams, and are:

1. Each team member makes a unique and significant contribution
2. The team is small – no more than eight people
3. Trust among team members is established early and maintained
4. Team and individual goals are clear and understood by all
5. Personal accountability for results is expected

Using these five principles in the order listed is a reliable way to build a leadership team.

Choose people who can make a difference
Each team member should be chosen because he or she can make a significant contribution to achieving the team's goals. Diversity in experience and problem solving is also important. Assembling people with unique skill sets increases the range of options the team is likely to consider and helps prevent "group think."

Avoid including people on a team just because of friendship or a feeling that the person "has earned it" or for any other reason than the strong belief the person will make an important, positive difference. Even one mediocre team member can significantly erode the effectiveness of a leadership team.

Limit team size
Small leadership teams are desirable because of large groups limit each member's "talk time." Here's why this is important.
Two types of dialog are necessary in leadership teams: advocacy and inquiry. Advocacy is the act of stating an idea or opinion. Inquiry is the act of asking questions or seeking to clarify what others have said. I believe in a 2 to 1 listening to talking (or inquiry to advocacy) ratio; as the old saying goes, "That's why you have two ears but only one mouth."

The problem with teams larger than eight people is that the limited talk time of each member results in discussions where the conversation is mostly in an advocacy mode. Without the benefit of thoughtful inquiry, some ideas may never be considered and others may not receive the scrutiny they need.

Establish and maintain high trust levels

The first and most important key to effective teamwork is trust. In the context of teamwork, trust is a confidence that your teammates' intentions are good, and there is no reason to be protective or careful around the group.

Trust is the glue that holds teams together. Trust liberates us, and releases creative ideas that increase the probabilities of success. The team leader must exhibit high personal standards that inspire trust

Clarify Team Goals and Individual Objectives

After establishing an atmosphere of trust, the foremost challenge is communication and clarity. The team leader must ensure the group stays firmly rooted in reality, sets clear goals and priorities, and follows through on all tasks. Uniform understanding of the goals and activities needed to reach these goals infuses the team with a shared sense of purpose. Clarifying goals sounds simple, but our human nature usually steps in to make things difficult.

To be effective, people must first understand the team's goal and their role in achieving that goal. Strong leadership teams stay focused on execution as they:

1. Engage in unambiguous, passionate debate about key issues,
2. Understand the danger of seeking consensus, and find ways to achieve buy-in even when complete agreement is impossible,
3. Take pride in being able to unite behind a decision even when they know the decision may be wrong,
4. Set and honor deadlines, and
5. Clarify contingency plans to be mentally prepared for unexpected situations.

High performance teams generate useful ideas from all team members and work to align the goals of all team members with overall team goals.

Ensuring Personal Accountability for Results

When you establish clear goals for individuals and publicly announce them within a team culture of honesty and respect, measuring progress on those goals puts pressure on individual team members to perform. Most people dislike disappointing their teammates, especially when victories are enthusiastically celebrated. Celebrating big wins and small ones builds enthusiasm and spirit, and makes everyone want to earn more of that positive feeling.

And with that, I wish you Happy Holidays!

Tom Wagner

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