The Secrets of Great Teamwork

Overview of article by Martine Haas & Mark Mortensen; June 2016 Issue

"Today's teams are different from the teams of the past: They're far more diverse, dispersed, digital, and dynamic (with frequent changes in membership). But while teams face new hurdles, their success still hinges on a core set of fundamentals for group collaboration."

Following insight from J. Richard Hackman, HBR conducted a 15 year study where they looked at teams and groups in a variety of contemporary setting. "In our own studies, we've found that three of Hackman's conditions—a compelling direction, a strong structure, and a supportive context—continue to be particularly critical to team success … modern teams are vulnerable to two corrosive problems—'us versus them' thinking and incomplete information."

"The key takeaway for leaders is this: Though teams face an increasingly complicated set of challenges, a relatively small number of factors have an outsized impact on their success. Managers can achieve big returns if they understand what those factors are and focus on getting them right."

The Enabling Conditions: climates that help diverse teams (4-D) attain high performance

Compelling direction: "The foundation of every great team is a direction that energizes, orients, and engages its members." Teams require inspiration and explicit goals that challenge but do not dispirit members. Consequential goals also help team members care about achieving a goal with extrinsic or intrinsic rewards. "On 4-D teams, direction is especially crucial because it's easy for far-flung members from dissimilar backgrounds to hold different views of the group's purpose." For example, one global team studied all agreed that serving their client was their goal, but what that meant varied greatly across locations.

Strong structure: "High-performing teams include members with a balance of skill … where the team needs a healthy dose of superlative technical and social skills." Increase diversity to help teams be creative with interpretations and avoid groupthink. A combination of cosmopolitan (global members) and local members creates a dynamic of technical knowledge and expertise with local insight into a specific area's culture. "Taking both perspectives into account, the team came up with a more sustainable design for its project."

Regarding numbers, HBR suggests adding members to increase diversity but watch out for larger teams that are more vulnerable to poor communication, fragmentation, and free riding. Leaders should be vigilante to only add members when necessary and ask what unique value that person will bring to the group. Design assignments to let members hold a significant piece of work from beginning to end with autonomy and feedback to ensure motivation. People in different locations often end up holding different components of a project which can create issues. Giving members ownership over an entire module can dramatically increase motivation and engagements through improved quality, quantity, and efficiency of work.

"Teams can reduce the potential for dysfunction by establishing clear norms—rules that spell out a small number of things members must always do (such as arrive at meetings on time and give everyone a turn to speak) and a small number they must never do (such as interrupt)."

Supportive context: "This includes maintaining a reward system that reinforces good performance, an information system that provides access to the data needed for the work, and an educational system that offers training, and last—but not least—securing the material resources required to do the job, such as funding and technological assistance." While different geographical locations may

make this difficult. Finding what is necessary for each team division to succeed will aid in the overall success of the group.

Shared mindset: "Our research indicates that today's teams need … distance and diversity, as well as digital communication and changing membership, make them especially prone to the problems of "us versus them" thinking and incomplete information." To achieve this, develop a shared mindset among team members by fostering a common identity and understanding. Teams with homogenous members used to work well together but that has shifted, with the need for smaller subgroups. This cognitive shortcut tends to create tension and hinder collaboration. "The team's problems were due to differences in resources, not to a cultural clash."

Missing information can become more of an issue in 4-D teams. "Very often, certain team members have important information that others do not, because they are experts in specialized areas or because members are geographically dispersed, new, or both." Information needs to be communicated to the rest of the team, with shared knowledge at the cornerstone of effective collaboration. While digital dependence can hinder communication, face-to-face teams can rely on nonverbal cues for additional situational insight. Digital communication can harm the transmission of this additional intelligence. Solve this issue by emphasizing that both subteams contributed necessary skills and have mutual dependence. Bring teams together more often that create shared experiences and reference points and stories. Get rid of 'us and them' and switch to 'we.'

"Many participants in our field research and executive education sessions promote shared understanding through a practice called "structured unstructured time"—that is, time blocked off in the schedule to talk about matters not directly related to the task at hand." Teams can achieve this by reserving the first 10 minutes of meetings for open discussion, but be sure to have a clear purpose to eliminate potential awkwardness. Virtually you can achieve this by having members 'meet' and explore each other's workspaces virtually. This can also help the teams better interpret and understand each other's attitudes and behaviors.

Evaluating Your Team: determine team effectiveness through output, collaborative ability, and members' individual development

"For ongoing monitoring, we recommend a simple and quick temperature check: Every few months, rate your team on each of the four enabling conditions and also on the three criteria of team effectiveness. Look in particular at the lowest-scored condition and lowest-scored effectiveness criteria, and consider how they're connected. The results will show where your team is on track as well as where problems may be brewing."

Longer sessions should be about an hour to conduct an intervention assessment. Examine links between lowest-rate conditions and team effectiveness criteria. Determine the relationships to create a way to move forward. For a team-based check, you should compare results across the group. For a team-based intervention, you can increase the impact by holding a full-scale workshop, where all the members get together to discuss and compare results. Not only does this give you more-complete data—shining a light on potential blind spots—but it also reveals differences among viewpoints and opens up areas for discussion.

Teamwork has never been easy—but in recent years it has become much more complex. And the trends that make it more difficult seem likely to continue, as teams become increasingly global, virtual, and project-driven. Taking a systematic approach to analyzing how well your team is set up to succeed—and identifying where improvements are needed—can make all the difference.

https://hbr.org/2016/06/the-secrets-of-great-teamwork