

Exponential Consulting Leadership Topic

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Building Effective Teams

By Stephen Billing

Building effective teams means knowing the members of your team individually and collectively. Knowing your team members collectively requires you to become aware of the dynamics of relating amongst your team members.

First, think about what is working well in your team. I hope you can identify a number of things that are going well.

Then, think of what you would like to improve in your team.

Do you have a team or an administrative unit?

People in organizations are grouped into administrative units in order to assist with managing the organization. These units are often called teams but may not in fact be teams at all. Do you manage a team or an administrative unit?

The key test to tell if you have a team or not is that if you have a team, then the team as a whole succeeds or fails in achieving its objectives. In other words, you can't have some people succeeding and others failing in a team. For a team, either the team (i.e. everybody in the team) succeeds or the team (and everybody in it) fails.

If you have an administrative unit, then it is possible for one person to achieve their goals and for another person in the unit not to. For example, if you are set up in such a way that the sales team might reach their targets but Research and Development not succeed, then you have an administrative unit, not a team.

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There is nothing wrong with having an administrative unit and not a team – it is quite fine to work in or be the leader of an administrative unit. What is important is to recognize what you are dealing with so that you can manage it appropriately. In other words, don't try to team build an administrative unit.

Team Roles

It is worth thinking about the roles that people play in your team. There are many assessment instruments that purport to measure this, and they are not worth the paper they are printed on, in my opinion – other than that I don't feel strongly about it. They are certainly not worth paying for, and I speak as a person who is accredited to administer some of them.

I think that Meredith Belbin's approach is worth considering, because you can work out for yourself who is playing what role in your team and you don't need all the gimmickry and mystery of the questionnaires.

Belbin said that in teams there are action oriented, people oriented and cerebral roles. Action oriented roles are pretty self explanatory – they are the roles that help the team get things done. Think about who in your team is shaping your objectives, who is a reliable implementer and who makes sure things go all the way to completion. These are action oriented roles.

People oriented roles coordinate the activities of people, smooth relationships and develop contacts.

Cerebral roles are generators of new ideas, analysts and specialists.

Think about your team and who is playing these roles in terms of your team's results, cohesion and development. If you have any of these roles missing, then you either need to take those roles up more strongly yourself or ask members of the team to do so. If you want to find out more about Belbin's approach, just look it up on Google, there is plenty of information out there that will help you.

Group Development Stages

Ken Blanchard in his One Minute Manager series popularized the notion that groups go through certain development stages. While it is far from proven that this is the case, I think it is nevertheless useful for managers to be aware of this theory, because it encourages you to think of your team's needs and then what you as leader can do to help develop the group.

Blanchard's work is based on the ideas of Bruce Tuckman who sees groups in terms of their productivity and morale, and that team leaders adjust their style to provide what the group members cannot provide

themselves. According to this theory, groups go through predictable stages as follows:

1. **Forming** – when expectations and morale is high, while productivity is low because the group hasn't figured out what they have to do yet. It is said that as a leader, you should be directive when the group is forming, which means doing things like explaining the goals, .sharing necessary information and developing the skills of those in the group.
2. **Storming** – after the initial honeymoon, there is a dip in morale as people realize the task is harder than they expected and struggle for a sense of purpose and independence. Conflict, negative reactions to each other and confusion become evident. The leader of a group in this stage should gradually reduce the amount of direction and increase the amount of encouragement and support. Develop ground rules for listening and managing conflict.
3. **Norming** – As a team works through the conflict of the previous stage, the members begin to adjust their behaviour to each other, agreeing on rules, values, working tools and norms, and begin to trust each other. Motivation increases. The team risks avoiding disagreement at this stage and the role of the leader is to step back, let the group manage itself, but be prepared to step in to encourage disagreement and help work through conflict, so that the group can learn to manage itself.
4. **Performing** – Some groups reach the stage where they are able to get the job done smoothly and effectively without inappropriate conflict or the need for external supervision. At this stage, the role of the leader is to step back and let the group perform.

What stage would you say your team was in? Given that, what style of leadership is most appropriate? It may not be your preferred or most comfortable style. But if you want to build an excellent team, then you need to be able to adjust your leadership style according to the needs of the group, rather than having a leadership style that meets your own needs but not the needs of your team.

Virtual Teams

Do you have members of your team who are not geographically located with the others? Or perhaps you have team members who only work weekends and don't see the weekday staff. If so, you have a virtual team, or possibly a virtual administrative unit. There are some challenges with this because it is harder to get people together and it is easy for the remotely located members to become left out of developments as the team and its processes evolve together.

Here are some tips if you have remotely located members of your team:

- Lots more planning is required, so that the geographical barriers can be overcome.

- Use the telephone. The simple conference call is often overlooked. You can dial in remote people to your team meeting – phone calls do not all have to be one on one.
- Go out of your way to involve remote team members. The natural gravity of the relationships with the remote members is for them to become more and more excluded. So you have to make sure you keep fighting that gravitational pull by putting more effort into involving your remote team members.
- Schedule frequent times to check in, especially with the remote team members. Much more frequent than you do for those who are located with you. Your remote team members are missing out on brief opportunities to talk in the lunch room or at breaks. So you have to consciously make those opportunities with the remote team members using the phone or email.
- Maximise every face to face opportunity you get. These are likely to be relatively rare, so make sure you get the most out of them. If you do have the opportunity to meet face to face, make sure you include the opportunity for some time with no agenda at all – whether it's something social or a part of the meeting that has no agenda. Too often the only time the remote members get to see their managers and colleagues are in meetings where every moment is planned in advance. It is very hard to build good working relationships when every moment is pre-programmed.

Summary

To summarise then, consider the needs of your group and whether they are actually a team or an administrative unit.

Think about the roles of the members of your team. Who are your action oriented members? Who are your people-oriented members? Who are your thinkers and analysers?

What stage of group development can you identify for your team? Is your usual style of leadership meeting the needs of that stage of development? You may need to adjust it.

And if you have a remote team then you need to pay much more attention to planning, and watch the group dynamics extra carefully.