

Leading and Managing an Effective Team

Last week Debra Sabatini Hennelly introduced this series that discusses *leading and managing an effective team*. In the previous article, she went in depth on *the case for focusing on team dynamics*. Today she zeroes in on what managers can do to facilitate a cohesive functional group.

Key Highlights of this Article

The groundwork for a successful team requires some basic things from you (as their manager), at a minimum, in order to work effectively as a cohesive working group:

1. Clear mission and expectations.
2. Documented team objectives and performance metrics.
3. Clarity of roles and the freedom and authority to exercise them.

The way a team plays as a whole determines its success. You may have the greatest bunch of individual stars in the world, but if they don't play together, the club won't be worth a dime.

- Babe Ruth

THE SETUP: AVOIDING THE CONFUSION THAT COMES FROM AMBIGUITY

If a team does not start out with a clear mission, and with clarity of roles and expectations, it likely will be doomed to misunderstandings, wasted time and resources or even failure to deliver the desired results. In fact, without a strong, collective call to action, the dynamic could easily turn to one of fractured, siloed, even competitive interactions that detract from the forward motion of the team. With too much focus on individual objectives and performance, we can quickly find resources, energy and morale dissipating... and team goals become unreachable.

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Things Managers Must Provide To Create A Cohesive Team

1. Clear mission and expectations:

- **The challenge**—the problem you want them to solve; the process/program/initiative you want them to create; the change you want them to drive; the strategy or plan you want them to develop.
- **The context**—be as transparent as you can in giving them situational awareness for their mission, the reasons why this mission is important to the organization. Err on the side of sharing

more than just what you think they “need to know” to get their isolated mission accomplished in a vacuum (even if it means having them commit to mission-specific confidentiality); they will work best if they can see clearly see how their work fits into the “big picture.”

- **The timeframe**—when you need a first draft/interim drafts; when the final deliverable is due; and any contingencies or dependencies, such as other teams’ deliverables (or input from you) in order to get their job done.
- **Your confidence**—why you chose them, asked for them or assigned this to them; why you think they are the right mix of talent, expertise and perspectives for this mission; and why you don’t feel you will need to micromanage them (though you want them to feel comfortable coming to you if they need support or further clarification).

2. Documented team objectives and performance metrics:

- That collective team mission has to be broken up into **quantifiable objectives or workstreams**, each with a plan that has time-bound milestones; ideally, these objectives should be developed collectively in a discussion that includes you (to ensure alignment with your expectations).
- Any “**mission creep**” (work outside these agreed-to objectives or workflows) must be curtailed—every team member should have the freedom to call that out, even if you (or some other leader) are the one causing the “creep.”
- The performance of each member of the team is measured not only by delivering on their individual objectives, but also by **whether the team as a whole delivers on these team objectives**. It is human nature to try to meet expectations against which we are being measured for performance ratings and compensation. If team members are not measured on contributing to and achieving team objectives—but only on their individual objectives—will they be motivated to operate as a cohesive unit?

3. Clarity of roles and the freedom and authority to exercise them—Each workstream must have clearly defined roles to support it. Here we can borrow some basic, but extremely important, discipline from the project management world’s Responsibility Charting technique, sometimes referred to as “RAC” charting:

- **R: Responsible**—the members of the team who are the “doers” for each objective or workstream (not all team members need to be involved actively in the “doing” on all objectives);
- **A: Accountable**—the **ONE** team member who is ultimately answerable for the activity and has the necessary authority to make decisions (including “veto power”) about whether a milestone has been achieved and how the workstream moves forward;
- **C: Consulted**—those whose input into the workstream activities is required (such as subject matter experts who may be outside the team) in order for the deliverables to be considered sufficient and complete—this is expected to be a **dialogue** between the “A” (or an “R”) and a “C;” and
- **I: Informed**—those who should be kept apprised of the work on a particular objective (such as those who will need to take action as a result of a decision by the team)—this is a **communication** about a particular milestone from the “A” (or an “R”) to an “I.”

If these roles and communication channels are **clearly identified at the beginning of the team’s work**—and if the team members have the requisite **authority and freedom** to fulfill these roles without second-guessing or micromanaging—then they are likely to be set up for smooth sailing toward the desired results.

4. Process discipline and project management—if there is not a skilled project manager supporting the team (highly recommended), someone on the team must be accountable for documenting the work stream plans, the meeting notes and action items, and then all the team members must be responsible for holding each other to those commitments. *(There are some great tools for creating and updating this kind of documentation, and not all of them are complicated.)*

Opportunities for Action

1. Give your team as much context as possible and a clear explanation of what you expect from them by when. And make clear why you think each of them has something important to contribute to getting to the desired results. Then try to let them move forward without micro-managing their process.
 2. Measure (and compensate) the performance of the team members, not just by their individual performance, but by their contribution to getting the whole team across the finish line. “What gets measured (and compensated) gets managed.”
 3. Ensure that you have clearly defined the roles and responsibilities for each team member (remember “RACI”)—with only one team member being accountable for each of the key workstreams. And be sure to give authority where you designate accountability. Then make sure the team has the freedom and support to exercise the roles you have given them.
 4. Require process discipline and documented milestones. Check in on progress against those milestones on a regular basis (“actuals against plan”).
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