



2005 OTS Highlight. Team Leadership Skills: Five Tips

DR. LYNDA PINNINGTON HIGHLIGHTS THE IMPORTANCE OF EFFECTIVE TWO-WAY TEAM COMMUNICATION

Over the past few years, many organizations have adopted a “team approach” in their workplace. This has happened for a variety of reasons: to increase productivity, reduce costs and improve employee morale to name a few. In most cases, the results have been positive. However, the shift to teamwork has also created an unexpected surprise for some managers and supervisors who may have been unaware that leading teams requires a different approach and different skills.

In this article, we will explore some of the keys to creating effective teams and some of the skills required by managers, supervisors and owners who wish to lead work teams successfully.

1. Clear Goals

To be effective, team members must have a clear understanding of the purpose and goals of the team. “*Why do we need to*

work as a team? What benefit will there be to me as an employee? What will be expected of me and how will it be different from working independently?” Employees will be asking all these questions and even if they do not ask them aloud, they will be thinking them. Team leaders have to ensure that they have some answers. Often, people will say that they have a good team at work, when in fact what they have is a nice group of people who get along well. A real team has specific goals and a clearly understood reason to exist.

A common mistake that is sometimes made in organizations is to make an announcement that there will be teams and then hope that somehow the employees themselves determine what this means. One company made a decision to adopt a team approach, bought sets of T-shirts in five different colours, had a company meeting to hand out the shirts and told

everyone, “You are now on the blue/red/yellow/green/black team.” Unfortunately, that’s as far as they went in the planning. The employees dutifully wore their designated shirts but had no idea what the purpose was or what it meant to be part of a particular team. After a few months, management became frustrated with the staff and blamed them for not being good team players. The whole thing came to a disappointing end because management had never really determined the purpose of the teams, nor had they communicated specific team goals to the staff.

2. Effective Communication

It seems as if communication is always mentioned, but it should be fairly obvious that if you want a group of people to work together as a team there has to be a solid basis for communication. This can mean many things from sharing knowledge and information to running effective team

meetings to being able to talk to one another about issues without creating conflict or hard feelings. Team leaders should work with team members to develop a Communication Plan which addresses the following questions:

- Who needs to be kept informed about what we are doing?
- Whose input do we need to carry out our work?
- Who needs to be consulted on team decisions?
- How will we ensure that everyone on the team has an opportunity to speak and contribute at team meetings?
- When will we meet? What will be the purpose of our meetings?
- How will we share information among employees who work different shifts and in different locations?

Sometimes our communication barriers are so subtle that we don't even realize they are there. One company found this out when they decided to use cross-functional teams to address customer service issues. The people working in the offices had no trouble communicating with each

other by telephone and email. But the employees in the field who worked in trucks had no access to computers and couldn't receive information, meeting agendas, etc. In fact, the only way that messages could be relayed to these employees was by contacting their supervisors and then hoping that the messages would be passed along. This company learned that they had to find ways to include their outside employees in the communication loop before they could even participate in teams.

3. Willingness to Share Decision Making

One of the most challenging adjustments for managers and supervisors as they shift to their new role as team leaders is to learn to share decision making. One of the greatest benefits of teamwork is having the collective thinking power of several people working on problems and coming up with new ideas to improve their work. Unfortunately, this is also one of the most difficult things for team leaders to accept, especially if they have a long history of making decisions independently.

Many owners, managers and supervisors fear that they will lose their power or the respect of their staff if they allow others to participate in decision making. They somehow see allowing others to contribute to decision making as a diminishing of their role and their authority. As a first step, if this does seem difficult, employees can be asked for their input on decisions or encouraged to contribute their suggestions or ideas. It is also unrealistic to expect employees who have never been asked to contribute to decision making before to become instant experts. Effective teams acknowledge that there is a learning curve here and many teams have discovered that it can be very helpful to have everyone on the team learn group decision making techniques. These techniques help people understand how to approach a decision, how to consider options in an objective manner and how to reach consensus while minimizing conflict.

4. Effective Utilization of all Team Resources

One of the major reasons that organizations adopt the team approach is to utilize the strengths and talents of their



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employees. In our complex world, it is becoming increasingly difficult for individuals to know everything there is to know or have the skill to carry out every job function in an organization. Think of a sports team. A baseball team made up of the 25 best pitchers in the world will not win the World Series. A variety of skills are needed – not just pitchers but fielders, batters, catchers and even bench players whose only role is to be ready to come into the game if someone gets hurt.

Good team leaders recognize that a key to success is to find out what each member brings to the team in terms of skills, abilities and knowledge and then to allow the team members to use those skills and abilities when appropriate. This not only adds to productivity but can also be very motivating for staff as well. A team leader who took the time to find out what staff members' talents were discovered that a young field employee was an excellent artist and was thrilled to be asked to help design and draw a poster. One characteristic of effective teams is that all team members are positive, active contributors.

Appreciating all team members' talents is a powerful way to create this positive environment.

The moral: one of the primary reasons to use a team approach is to create synergies which allow organizations and people to achieve much more than they could on their own. Finding out what each member brings to the team in terms of skills and talents and then providing opportunities for them to utilize those talents is a powerful motivator.

5. Willingness to Accept Feedback

Anyone who has taken a Supervisory Development course is well aware that providing feedback to staff is an essential component of a supervisor or manager's job. People need to know what they are doing well so they can continue to do it, and they need to know what they are not doing well so that they can work to improve. This feedback can be given informally during the course of the work day or formally in performance reviews and written or verbal evaluations. Traditionally in organizations, this feedback has

gone one way – from the manager or supervisor to the employee.

One of the most challenging shifts for traditional managers and supervisors is to realize that as team leaders they have to be open to receiving feedback from their teams as well. Now, some managers might immediately assume this means giving staff "carte blanche" to criticize them and undermine their authority. That is definitely not the intent. In fact, if that were to happen, it would probably be a signal that some groundwork needs to be done before the organization is ready for teamwork. What we mean here is that team members and team leaders have to be able to speak with each other honestly and openly. Team members have to be able to give positive feedback to the team leader. If employees appreciate receiving information and being consulted on decisions, they should be able to give that feedback to their team leader. Similarly, if team members find the team meetings boring or feel that they spend too much time listening to the team leader talk and don't have an opportunity to give their ideas, then they should also be able to give this feedback.

This means, as well, that it is a good idea for both team leaders and team members to learn how to provide feedback in a constructive, non-confrontational way. Many organizations which have formal annual performance appraisals for staff now include a segment in the appraisal meeting where employees are asked to provide feedback to the team leader and to provide their suggestions on how things could be improved in the coming year. Rather than creating a negative atmosphere, these companies are finding that doing this not only opens up communication but provides valuable feedback to managers and supervisors which they appreciate receiving.

Conclusion

Whether you have been leading in a team setting for a period of time, whether you have just recently begun working as a team leader, or whether you are still considering adopting a team approach, hopefully, these five tips will provide you with some practical ideas to help your team be successful. ♦

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