Avoiding the 7 Big Team-Building Blunders



“The whole is greater than the sum of the parts.” Everyone’s heard that expression. And we’re all familiar with what it means: An effective team can accomplish more as a whole than its individual members can accomplish on their own.

The key word here is *effective*. Building an effective, high-performing team requires more than simply throwing a group of outstanding individuals into a room and telling them they can’t come out until they have a solution. And maintaining an effective team requires planning, communication and decision-making. Assess individual strengths and weaknesses, build support, establish the conditions for effectiveness, agree on your goals—and you’re on the road to building a championship team. But lead with your emotions, shy away from hard decisions, have faith that the process will “work itself out,” populate your team with your personal favorites—and don’t be surprised if your outstanding individuals fail to harness their collective talent. We see it in sports all the time. And it happens in business just as often.

And, you too can build and manage a high-performing team by avoiding these seven team-building blunders:

1. Failure to build support for the team with the right people at the right levels

Building Buy In – an investment you can’t afford NOT to make

We’ve seen many cases in which an employee is assigned to a team even though his or her regular manager doesn’t know the team’s goals or the time commitment required of the employee. This can be confusing to managers who aren’t on the team but whose direct reports may be. It can create an antagonistic atmosphere in which managers undermine a team’s efforts!

To avoid this blunder:

Ensure that information flows in both directions between the team members and their managers.

Keep in mind that participating on a cross-functional team can take time and focus away from the team members’ day-to-day jobs. This can lead to the perception among managers that they are losing control of their people.

Most teams need time, budget, tools and support to be successful. If the infrastructure is not available, productivity can be affected. If you need to secure resources needed by the team, you can help remove barriers by promoting the team’s

interests with key stakeholders. Let them know how the team's success will reflect on the whole organization. Align each manager's expectations with the strategic importance of the team's mission.

2. Failure to establish conditions for team effectiveness

When building a team – skills & experience matter, but so do fit, chemistry & motives.

We've seen teams made up of members who don't know where the team is going or what their individual roles are. How can a team achieve anything when its members don't know what's going on?

Of course, you'll need to select and organize the right people. But that's not all. Skills and experience matter, but so do fit, chemistry and motives. That's why, when selecting a team, we advise using the same due diligence you use when you hire a new employee:

Look at performance reviews and check references, not only from managers but from co-workers as well. Understand why applicants want to be part of the team, as well as how being on the team will help them realize their longer-term goals.

We highly recommend that you review psychographic assessments in order to understand team members' core behaviors and learning styles—and how these behaviors and styles fit with their roles, other team members and yourself.

Look for the right skill sets *and* the right behaviors. Expertise might not be enough to qualify someone for the team. For example, say your top-performing salesperson is a lone wolf who doesn't play by the rules and won't socialize with his peers. Despite his extensive product knowledge, he might not be a good fit. In such a case, you may want to bypass that individual. But you may also want to interview him in order to gain an even better understanding of the product.

Remember:

A high-performing team has a mandate—one that every member should know. After explaining the mandate, give the team an opportunity to process this information. They should feel free to ask for clarity.

These discussions can help shape the mandate. Don't mistake this for a democratic process, but it certainly should be participatory.

3. Failure to establish a meaningful performance goal

If you don't know where you're going, how will you know when you get there?

We've seen cross-functional teams with members who refuse to acknowledge any point of view other than the one they see from their traditional silos. As you may know, that's a recipe for disaster. After all, the whole is only better than the sum of the parts if everything's moving in the right direction! To ensure team effectiveness, you'll need to clarify the deliverables that are linked to outcomes of team activities. Again, don't just lecture about it; discuss it with the team.

As you bring together people with unique capabilities and experiences, they're likely to have different perspectives. Without establishing interdependencies, you may find that the whole is actually smaller than the parts when team members are fixed on

their own tasks. This can negatively impact delivery sequence, timing and quality control.

Therefore, revisit team goals frequently to:

- **Keep them meaningful. It can be tempting for team members to concentrate only on their individual tasks and challenges.**
- **Keep people's heads out of the sand and aware of what matters to the team as a whole. This drives performance toward the desired outcome, and enables adjustment of goals, timing or resources needed for success.**

4. The absence of a decision-making process

It is important to create an environment that allows team members to voice their opinions in an open & honest manner.

If a team leader doesn't spend enough time framing problems, the team will lack direction. This means soliciting the perspective of individual members and stepping through the team's interdependent activities to identify potential challenges and solutions.

Again, you don't need to establish a truly democratic process. But you do need every team member to participate. You will need to make difficult decisions at times. You will also be called upon to break ties and settle differences between team members while at the same time keeping everyone motivated and on board. The most important thing you can do is to create an environment that allows team members to voice their opinions in an open and honest manner. Get all sides of the story, and then weigh these arguments to make a decision that is in the best interest of the team.

To do this in a fair and consistent manner, you should establish data and metrics to help you make decisions more objectively, and share those metrics with the team.

This will help to diffuse emotions. And it will serve as a testing platform to explore disparate ideas and make informed decisions.

5. Failure to establish appropriate norms

A certain amount of conflict is healthy.

Executives aren't necessarily content experts. Your team could have a C-suite sponsor who isn't a subject-matter authority. Leaders need honest feedback. The communication channels must be wide open. Members shouldn't view you as a senior executive, but as a facilitator. Spell that out. Describe your role in team terms. As the leader, your job is to focus and motivate—and at times to make tough decisions. Let everyone know you don't have all the answers and that you'll look to the team's collective expertise.

A certain amount of conflict is healthy. It demonstrates that people care about the project. Tolerating dissent allows people to be honest, and it puts the team's interests above the interests of individual members. To find the right balance:

- **Encourage collaboration and educated risk-taking.**
- **Set the right tone and the right reward structure that prompts everyone to contribute.**

- **Let people know that there may be some degree of ambiguity and that testing different approaches and taking smart risks is necessary for achieving the best result. This means that the answer will not always be clear and that not all efforts will result in immediate success.**

Most importantly, you should use failure as an opportunity to dig deeper toward a solution.

6. Weak communication channels

There's no substitute for understanding the innate behaviors of your team members.

We recommend assessing team members in order to understand their individual communication styles. You'll want to make space for different kinds of conversations and participatory approaches. Without an objective assessment of how individual team members communicate, collaborate, learn and solve problems, how can you facilitate the best possible communications?

There's no substitute for understanding the innate behaviors of your team members. This knowledge will provide you with a better understanding of their individual styles. It is also important to understand how this impacts communication among team members, and it enables you to anticipate sources of conflict or other challenges. This is especially true when dealing with remote or virtual team members.

- **Encourage active listening and ensure influence based on task-relevant knowledge rather than on status or personal dominance.**
- **Apply your skills as a leader and facilitator to moderate the group and ensure that people have adequate opportunities to contribute.**

This goes back to establishing norms and rules of engagement, and enforcing these rules when necessary. When you form a team, you might not know everyone on it. You'll want to get to know each member. A formal assessment of skills and strengths is an effective, time-tested method.

7. Insensitivity to diversity

Diverse viewpoints can lead a team to better problem-solving.

In addition to helping leadership understand individual work styles, assessments also help team members appreciate the impact that their own styles have on others. Diverse viewpoints can lead a team to better problem-solving and superior solutions in the same way that diverse cultures can lead an organization to a deeper understanding of complex global issues.

In our practice, we help leaders develop strategies for embracing diversity. It can be difficult to initiate diversity discussions, especially among members of multicultural teams. But it's necessary for leaders to talk with members about how diversity can affect participation.

Diversity touches on issues beyond race and gender:

- **You may have team members for whom English is a second language. You'll need to ensure they have opportunities to make their points.**
- **You may have members in far-flung time zones. Most of us are less effective at two o'clock in the morning than at two o'clock in the afternoon. That's why some teams have platforms for asynchronous communication—so that members can participate in a time-zone friendly manner.**

Establish norms and enforce the rules. For example, discrimination on the basis of race, gender, lifestyle, national origin or religion must be dealt with immediately and decisively.

Summary

We believe that “wholes” don’t become better than the sum of their parts by accident. Creating a team that exceeds the capabilities of its individual members requires commitment, planning and time.

When a team comes together, the positive effects ripple throughout the organization:

Managers who aren’t on the team may have to sacrifice their best people to it. They should know what the team is about and how its efforts will benefit the entire organization.

Co-workers may be asked to shoulder additional responsibilities while their peers serve on the team. This can lead to resentments. That’s why even non-members need to understand the team’s mission and how it will ultimately affect them.

People from different levels of the organization may feel confused by a new reporting structure or chain of command. Never assume they’ll figure it out for themselves. That can stifle dissent and cripple the robust debate that is sometimes necessary for a breakthrough.

Comprised of talented individuals from all levels, a diversity of viewpoints, a range of expertise and a balance of personalities, high-performance teams are well-integrated into their organizations. Members know their own responsibilities, but they also understand the team’s goals, its decision-making processes and its rules of operation.