

8 ways to build collaborative teams

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In September 2007 we wrote an eZine on teambuilding. In this issue we're going to concentrate on one aspect of teams - collaboration i.e. how to get people really working together.

We take no credit whatsoever for the ideas in this issue as it is a summary of an article by Lynda Gratton and Tamara J. Erickson which appeared in November 2007's Harvard Business Review. Unusually for the Harvard Business Review the article is very practical and makes a lot of sense so we thought it would be worth producing a summary.

To buy the article go to >>

http://harvardbusinessonline.hbsp.harvard.edu/b02/en/common/item_detail.jhtml?id=R0711F&referral=2340

The background

The article is based on research carried out by Gratton and Erickson in 15 multi-national companies. They argue that teams (in large organisations) are now larger and more complex than ever - technology allows them to operate virtually, team members come from ever more diverse backgrounds and they are composed of highly educated specialists. However, the research found that although these characteristics are needed for success, they actually make success less likely.....!

...as the size of the team increases beyond 20 people, the tendency to collaborate naturally decreases.

...as teams become more virtual co-operation decreases.

...as team members become more diverse collaboration reduces - team members collaborate more if they perceive themselves as being alike

...the more experts there are in the team the more likely it is to disintegrate into non-productive conflict or stalemate

The researchers studied 55 large teams and identified the characteristics that were shared by teams who succeed despite their complexity. They identified 8 practices that fall into 4 categories - executive support, HR practices, strength of the team leader and the structure of the team itself.

The reason the article is so powerful is that whatever your role in your organisation (MD, HR Manager or Manager) you can have an influence over how successful your teams are.

Executive Support

Whether teams succeed or fail reflects the philosophy of the most senior people in the organisation. The way senior people operate sets the tone of the organisation and employees quickly learn what the accepted standards of behaviour are.

Teams collaborate more effectively where the organisation's senior managers:

1. Invest in building and maintaining social relationships throughout the organisation.

The article provides two examples - RBS and BP. RBS built a new HQ in 2005, but the design of the building was a deliberate attempt to foster improved social relationships. The building has a central atrium where people can meet. It has shops, restaurants, jogging trails, a gym and swimming pool amongst other things. BP have a policy of constantly moving employees between departments and even countries in an effort to build strong relationships across the whole organisation.

2. Model collaborative behaviour

As we have already said, how senior people behave has a powerful effect on the behaviour of everyone else in the organisation. People will literally copy and adopt the behaviour of senior people based on what they see....or what they *perceive* !

3. Create a "gift culture"

The senior managers in the companies with the most successful teams ensure that coaching and mentoring are embedded in their own routine behaviour and throughout the company. The "gift" is often time, but also knowledge and experience. If managers are prepared to give time to their people then they will quickly learn to give time to their colleagues.

HR Practices

When thinking about collaboration many people cite the importance of HR practices in reinforcing collaboration e.g., the need to have reward policies that reinforce collaboration over individual effort. However, the research found that most HR practices do not actually have any significant impact. Two do though:

4. Training people in collaborative skills

The research showed that even where teams want to collaborate and there is a culture of collaboration, if they do not know *how* to collaborate then it creates difficulties. There were a number of key skills required for effective collaboration - appreciating others, being able to engage in purposeful conversations, the ability to productively resolve conflicts and programme management.

5. Supporting a sense of community

HR can play a role in cultivating a communal spirit within the organisation. Examples given include sponsoring events and activities outside work and using communication tools that celebrate employee achievements.

Team Leaders

Team Leaders have a major role to play in encouraging collaboration. The best team leaders have a flexible style.

6. Assigning team leaders who are both task and relationship oriented

In the research the most productive teams were both task and relationship oriented i.e. they were able to focus on setting clear goals and getting done what needed to be done and to focus on resolving conflict and building relationships. In addition they shifted their focus during the project. At the start of the project they were more task oriented. They then switched to being more relationship oriented as the project progressed.

Team formation and structure

It might seem obvious, but the makeup and structure of the team has an impact on the level of collaboration and success.

7. Building on heritage relationships

Trust is extremely important in collaboration. The most successful teams already have members who know each other. The research showed that when 20-40% of team members were already connected to each other the teams had strong collaboration from the start. Where team members do not know each other they have to spend considerable time building those trusting relationships. However, there is a note of caution - when a significant number of people in the team already know each other they will form sub-groups and these can inhibit collaboration.

8. Understanding role clarity and task ambiguity

There is a common assumption that if the team goals are clear the team will work out who should do what resulting in improved collaboration. The research shows the opposite to be true - collaboration improves when the roles of individual team members are clearly defined and well understood. Without this clarity team members will waste time and energy negotiating roles and protecting their turf. In addition, if the method of achieving the team's goals is left ambiguous the team members are more likely to want to collaborate.

How can we help you?

Some of this might seem obvious, but it does provide some concrete ideas, thought, conclusions and actions that you could take to improve collaboration in your organisation. Management development is our core business so we could help you:

- develop your own leadership style
- develop your managers' leadership style
- facilitate your teams at the early stages of their development to help them clarify team roles, how to handle conflict etc.
- develop your coaching skills
- by providing coaching support for your managers

Contact Us

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