

Steps in Successful Team Building

Introduction

The formation of workplace teams to carry out projects and achieve organisational goals is increasingly popular within organisations. Teams can play a key role in organisational success, but the development of good working relationships is vital to team performance. Organisations that take the time and trouble to invest in the development of positive interaction and cooperation in teams will reap the benefits of improved morale, more effective performance and the successful completion of projects.

Successful team building can:

- coordinate the efforts of individuals as they tackle complex tasks
- make the most of the expertise and knowledge of all those involved which might otherwise remain untapped
- raise and sustain motivation and confidence as individual team members feel supported and involved
- encourage members to bounce ideas off each other, to solve problems and find appropriate ways forward
- help break down communication barriers and avoid unhealthy competition, rivalry and point-scoring
- raise the level of individual and collective empowerment
- support approaches such as TQM, Just-in-Time management, customer care programmes, and Investors in People
- bring about commitment to and ownership of the task in hand.

This checklist provides an outline of the main steps in the development of workplace teams, but does not cover aspects specific to virtual or remote teams.

National Occupational Standards for Management and Leadership

This checklist has relevance for the following standards:

B: Providing direction, unit 5

Definition

A team is more than just a group of people who happen to work together. It is a group of people working towards common goals and objectives and sharing responsibility for the outcomes. Team building is the process of selecting and grouping team members effectively and developing good working relationships and practices which will enable the team to steer and develop the work and reach their goals. Increasingly, a team may be composed of people drawn from different functions, departments and disciplines who have been brought together for a specific project. Recent technological developments have also facilitated virtual or remote team working, where team members are based at different physical locations.

Action checklist

1. Decide whether you really do need a team

In some circumstances teams may be unsuitable – for example, in an organisation with a culture of rigid reporting structures or fixed work procedures. Bear in mind that the formation of a team may not always be the best approach - for example, when one person has the knowledge, skills and resources to undertake the job on their own. Consider whether there is a need for a mix of skills and experience, the sharing of workloads, or brainstorming and problem solving. In such cases a team will be the best option.

2. Define the objectives which need to be achieved and the skills needed to reach them

Be clear about the desired outcome of the project. Identify the technical, personal and team skills, knowledge and expertise needed for the task in hand and bring together suitable individuals. The key is to pick people with a mix of different skills. You may also wish to take into account the team roles identified in the work of R Meredith Belbin and ensure that you include people with the capacity to fulfil these roles. (See related Checklists).

3. Plan a team building strategy

Invest time at the outset in getting the operating framework right so that the team will develop and grow.

The following areas should be considered:

- a climate of trust - where mistakes and failures are viewed as learning experiences, not occasions for blame
- the free flow of information - to all those who need to integrate their work with business objectives
- training - in communication, interpersonal and negotiation skills, and for handling the tasks required and taking responsibility for them
- time - for coordinating activities, developing thoughts and ideas, monitoring progress, and for regular meetings
- objectives – these need to be clearly understood by all team members. This is increasingly a case of involving team members in setting the objectives rather than dictating prescribed objectives to them
- feedback - everybody needs to know how well they are doing and if and where improvements can be made. Feedback should focus on the positive aspects and on ways of addressing the negative ones.

4. Get the team together

At the initial meeting you should aim to start building the team as a team. Discuss and agree the outcomes the team is to achieve, rather than attempting to address the issues involved in the project or task. Bear in mind that most teams pass through several stages of growth before starting to produce their best work. This process is often referred to as follows:

- forming - as team members come together
- storming – as they work through the issues
- norming – as conflicts are resolved and working practices established
- performing – as objectives are achieved.

Make sure that everyone knows what their personal contribution to the team's success will be, its place in the project schedule and its importance to the project's success.

5. Explore and establish the operating ground rules

There will be a need:

- for open and honest communication, so that everyone can say what they think without fear, resentment or anger
- to listen to others, including minority or extreme views
- to agree which decision-making, reporting and other processes will be adopted for the life-span of the team.

6. Identify individuals' strengths

Carry out an audit of individuals' strengths so that the team as a whole can benefit from all the skills and expertise available. Consider bringing in someone with team building experience to help with the initial phases, especially if the team's task is major or complex.

7. See yourself as a team member

Your role is as a member of the team - not just the boss. Clarify that everyone in the team has an important role and yours happens to be the team leader. Act as a role model and maintain effective communication with all members, especially through listening. It may be beneficial for roles to remain fluid, adding to the flexibility of working relationships, but without team members losing the focus on their individual strengths or objectives. An effective leader may decide to cede project leadership - albeit temporarily - to another, when specific skills are required.

8. Check objectives

Check the team's objectives regularly to ensure that everyone still has a clear focus on what they are working towards, both individually and as a team.

9. Time meetings with care

Inessential meetings are a bane, but if there are too few, the project - and the team - can lose focus. Meet regularly but with purpose:

- to provide an opportunity to ask 'how are we doing?'
- to review progress on the task
- to reflect on how the team is working.

If any problems are identified, plan and implement appropriate action or corrective measures.

10. Dissolve the team

When the team has accomplished its tasks, acknowledge this. Carry out a final review to see if objectives have been achieved and evaluate the team's performance, so that individuals may learn, improve and benefit from the lessons learned. If all the objectives have been met the team can be disbanded.

Managers should avoid:

- expecting a new team to perform effectively from the word go
- dominating the work of the team, whether intentionally, unintentionally or even unconsciously
- exercising excessive control which may stifle creativity
- letting a team to become too exclusive, in case it loses touch with the rest of the organisation
- allowing individuals to take credit for the achievements of the team.

Additional resources

Books

Effective teamwork: practical lessons from organizational research, 2nd ed, Michael A West
Oxford: BPS Blackwell, 2004

Quick team building activities for busy managers: 50 exercises that get result in just 15 minutes, Brian Cole Miller
New York: AMACOM, 2004

Guiding the journey to collaborative work systems: a strategic design workbook, Michael M Beyerlein and Cheryl L harris
San Francisco: Pfeiffer, 2004

Teams and teamwork, Peter Honey
Maidenhead: Peter Honey Publications, 2001

This is a selection of books available for loan to members from the Management Information Centre. More information at: www.managers.org.uk/mic

Related checklists

Participating in projects (197)
Team briefing (81)
R Meredith Belbin: teambuilding (Management Thinker No. 23)

Internet resources

The Belbin website: The official Belbin Associates website which provides an introduction to Belbin's work and publications: www.belbin.com

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