

Hotel Business Review

Best practices, insights & trends

How Good Is the Team You Have in Place?

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Mr. Paul Feeney

Chances are you've built or inherited a team that most days seem to work pretty well. Perhaps you yourself are a part of a higher team. Perhaps your team members have their own teams in place. Looked at from this perspective, the entire organization is a collection of overlapping teams – from the board of directors to the smallest sales office and production unit.

The organization thus functions like a complex molecule, with the various teams as its atoms and each leader as a nucleus. And as long as any given team does not show obvious signs of radioactive decay, the comfortable assumption is that it's stable and performing as intended.

Naturally, team members have their foibles. Tom, for example, tends to become passive-aggressive when assigned tasks he doesn't enjoy. Amanda is too inclined to criticize other members of the team. And Ed shoots first, asking questions later. How many – if any – of such foibles should be accepted as normal human behavior? And how are they affecting overall team performance? Could the team be doing better than it does?

The Overlooked Importance of Teams

Over the years few organizations have clearly articulated performance standards for small groups of people – whether a headquarters staff, CRM unit, raw materials purchasing section, production planning department or accounts payable section.

Where incentive plans exist, they tend to be based on a combination of individual performance goals and large-group financial yardsticks (such as the sales or earnings performance of an entire division, or perhaps the total company).

In between, however, is the collective performance of those smaller groups of people who work together toward a common objective – managing a plant, bringing a new product from laboratory to market, creating advertising and direct-marketing programs, etc. Yet how often are such team leaders disciplined or penalized for having an incompetent as one of their direct reports? Instead, members of the team instinctively learn how to work around the individual, who continues onward, blissfully unaware of his or her incompetence.

If not held to strict standards of accountability, teams are likely to gravitate toward their lowest common denominator, becoming less and less effective over time.

Assessing Current Team Performance

If in doubt about the effectiveness of your immediate team (along with any others for which you have responsibility), here is a helpful series of questions to ask:

1. Does the team have well-defined, measurable goals that are understood by all members? If not, now would be an ideal time to establish them for 2004. Involve the team in the goal-setting exercise, not only in order to create individual ownership but also to surface

- ideas and issues that you may have overlooked.
2. Do individual job descriptions and performance goals mesh with those of the team? People's real-life responsibilities often evolve over time, but their job descriptions may not. Don't evaluate Priscilla's ability to do X if you are actually expecting her to do Y.
 3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each team member? In many cases, a weakness may be in reality a "need for improvement" that timely counseling can address. Ed's tendency to act on the basis of insufficient information should be a correctable trait, as should Amanda's criticism of others. Tom's passive-aggressive behavior, on the other hand, may be a personality problem that is too deeply ingrained to be solved by a performance review. At the same time, though, be sure to examine the positive contributions that each member makes to the team. One aggravating eccentricity may be offset by a valuable – and not easily replaceable – skill.
 4. Ask the \$64,000 question: "If I were starting over today, would I hire the same group of people?" If, for instance, you have six direct reports and would only hire four of them today, start thinking about what steps to take with the other two.

Fine-Tuning the Team

The larger an organization is, the greater are the ways to deal with an under-performer. He or she might be reassigned to a comparable position that would be a better "fit," demoted to a lesser position, counseled about what the future does or doesn't hold, encouraged to find other employment, offered early retirement or outright fired (the last, of course, with adequate documentation of past performance deficiencies and opportunities extended to improve). Human resources professionals are an important source of guidance.

In smaller organizations, the opportunities may be more limited – with the basic choice limited to keeping or terminating the individual. Leaders of smaller organizations tend to be more entrepreneurial and "hands on," and it is often difficult for them to fire people. There is little or no redundancy in personnel that might soften the loss, there is no corporate bureaucracy to involve in the decision and, in all probability, the leader will need to devote personal time to the search for a replacement while juggling other duties.

Executive search consultants, through their knowledge of the personnel market, often can play a helpful role in evaluating the pros and cons of making a major management change. Following a careful (and independent) assessment of the individual in question, his or her competitors in the marketplace and the compensation package that the position is able to pay, the search consultant might recommend to leave well enough alone. On the other hand, the consultant might advise that there are anywhere from a few to a significant number of candidates who are better qualified to perform the job and would find both your company and the compensation attractive.

Succession Planning and Upward Mobility

Successful team building, of course, not only strengthens present performance – but also pays important dividends down the road. By taking prompt steps to make sure the strongest possible team is in place, today's leaders help ensure that their organizations have the wealth of human capital required to lead them in the future.

Who will succeed you? Who will succeed other leaders in the company? Ideally, some or all of the contenders will come from your own direct reports – or perhaps, in large organizations, from similarly placed individuals on other teams. By the time Jack Welch finalized his plans to retire from General Electric, there were at least three highly qualified internal candidates to succeed him. (Within two weeks of when the winner was recently announced, the runners-up accepted CEO positions at other major companies. While their departures were anticipated, the speed with which they happened dazzled most observers).

Weak teams generally only get weaker, while strong teams build the foundation for even more success in the future. Wait no longer to ensure that your team has the players it needs to be on the winning side.

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