

Managers Letter

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Four Problems That Can Derail High-Performing Teams . . . and How to Resolve Them

by Donna Deeprose

Are you spending an increasing amount of time in project teams that combine members from various units in your organization? If so, you are part of a widening trend. The workplace is enamored with teams these days, and there are plenty of good reasons for the romance: Studies show a correlation between teams and improved productivity, quality, customer service and speed of response.

But even the most productive teams can get thrown off course if they are unprepared for the problems that tend to creep in after a team has been around for a while and enjoyed some success. A team that just weeks before was cohesive and dedicated and achieving its goals may now find itself undermined by conflicting priorities, loss of focus, tensions, disruptive turnover and rivalries among team members.

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Maybe it's because team members are tired. Maybe their core work load has piled up while they focused on the team's needs. Sometimes, a few members leave and new ones come on board, raising inclusion issues. Whatever the causes, the team is suddenly floundering and off-course

Conflicting Priorities

In one financial services organization, managers and professional employees say they are spending so much time on team assignments that they are doing their regular work “off the side of the desk.” Eventually that side of the desk can get too crowded to handle during lunch and after five o'clock.

Sometimes team members are called away to new projects by their managers. In these situations, members may miss team meetings, let team deadlines slide or beg off team assignments. Without concerted intervention, such teams can easily wither and die.

When the Backlog Becomes Too Much

If members can't balance their team commitments with the demands of their regular jobs, the team needs to streamline its operating procedures. Ways to do that include:

- ***Keeping meetings to a minimum.*** If you can communicate effectively another way, do so. Use e-mail, create a team Web site, circulate reports.
- ***Limiting meeting attendance.*** When you must meet, include only those members whose expertise is critical to the issue being addressed. Circulate the minutes to other members.
- ***Making agendas crisp and being tyrannical about sticking to the topic.*** Although they may try to use meeting time to discuss other issues, members will appreciate it afterward if the meeting is kept short and to the point.
- ***Being creative about meeting schedules.*** Find out what works for the team, whether it's several meetings with small groups, a series of short, full-team meetings close together followed by a dry spell or a full-day marathon to resolve a myriad of team issues in one session.

When Bosses Make Conflicting Demands

“That team stuff's all well and good but I need you to . . .” How many team members will defy that kind of order from their manager? Although defiance could endanger your job, negotiation and education might help you keep your seat on a high-performing project team.

When a team member's manager puts a lower priority on the team's project work, negotiating with the manager should start with the member and ratchet up from there to the team leader and even the team sponsor — usually a higher-level executive committed to supporting the team's work. In a meeting with a less-than-enthusiastic manager, aim to:

- ***Provide a fresh perspective*** on the team's purpose and the importance of the member's knowledge and skills.

- **Guide the manager** to a reassessment of the priority placed on the team's work. Relate it to organizational objectives and, if possible, directly to the objectives of the manager's department.

- **Obtain a commitment** from the manager to make the member available to the team for a specified time, or replace the team member with another employee with comparable knowledge and skills.

Loss of Focus

If your team started out with a broad mission, it may have a hard time readjusting after it completes its first measurable objective. Now is when members need to:

- **Redefine the team purpose and decide what comes next.** Clarify the long-term goal and measurements that will tell you when you've met it. Draw up a new action plan and revisit it regularly to make sure it remains pertinent and workable.

- **Assess ongoing performance.** Regular assessment gives team members an opportunity to identify and address problems before they derail the team.

- **Celebrate small victories.** If continuing team tasks don't create the same adrenaline rush as accomplishing that first objective, team members may need some encouragement. Find ways to reward members for small — but real — contributions.

- **Consider replacing the entire team.** Some organizations make each team responsible only for meeting one objective — then a new team takes over to carry the project to the next step. What's lost in continuity may be gained in renewed energy.

- **Recognize when a team's work is finished.** Sometimes teams struggle to stay alive when in fact their work is done. When that happens, celebrate success and disband.

Tensions and Rivalries Among Team Members

When everyone is working hard to achieve an objective, tensions are kept to a minimum. But stifled antagonisms may rise to the surface when a team is trying to redefine itself and the roles of its members. When tempers flare, take these successive steps to keep the team on track:

- **Ask yourself if performance is affected.** Blowing off steam isn't always bad; sometimes it's just the catharsis an individual or team needs to get past an irritation and move forward. If that's the case, ignore it. If the hostilities are affecting the team's performance, then address offending behavior as a team. Point out the discrepancy between the rules and the problematic behavior. If the team has no written rules, now's a good opportunity to create them.

- **Determine the root of the hostilities.** Do people disagree about how to solve a problem? In that case, learn and apply group problem-solving techniques. Is the issue less one of substance than one of style? If so, use a work-style assessment instrument to validate different styles and demonstrate the contributions of every style to the team.

Disruptive Turnover

While the replacement of team members is sometimes the only way to keep a project on track, turnover brings its own set of problems. Until newcomers are integrated, work can be slowed or disrupted by a tendency toward polite, guarded interchange or, on the other hand, overt or covert struggles for control. To get back into a high-performing mode, teams should:

- **Do their own recruiting.** A new team member who comes recommended by one or more fellow members will blend in faster than one appointed by an outside manager.

- **Bring the newcomer up to speed quickly.** Provide the new person with condensed copies of minutes of previous meetings and copies of action plans. Appoint one or two members to meet off-line with the newcomer to bring the person up-to-date.

- **Guard against "we" vs. "them."** If possible, pair new and old members on tasks. The team leader or an outside facilitator may need to do some team building to convince established team members of the importance of new ideas and new members of the value of experience.

Prevention

Experienced teams have noted that all these issues turn up less frequently when a team charter outlines the team's purpose, long and short-term objectives, ground rules, tasks, meeting schedules, and measures of success. If your team didn't create a charter at the outset, do it now. Once you have it, treat it as a living document, not a code set in stone. Revisit and update it regularly.

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