

Creating Effective Teams

Evidence suggests that in the right circumstances, teams can produce results collectively that far out way what an individual alone can achieve. How do you create an effective team that does perform at a heightened level?

Decades ago some big organisations introduced teams into their production processes and it made news because no one else was doing it. In today's organisations, it's the opposite, a business that doesn't use teams, to at least some extent, is the odd one out.

Evidence suggests that teams typically outperform individuals when the work being undertaken requires multiple skills, judgement and experience. Teams can also be more flexible and responsive to change and is more effective in facilitating employee participation within decision making. In addition, teams can increase employee motivation.

just as we seek to make all parts of our business function effectively, now that teams are an integral part of how businesses operate and achieve their goals, , we need to know how to ensure our teams are operating effectively. Firstly we need to understand what is meant the term team effectiveness. In brief, this includes objective measures of a team's productivity, manager's ratings of a team's performance, and measures of collective member satisfaction.

The key components of making up effective teams cover four general categories – context, composition, work design and process:

Context

All work teams rely on resources outside of the group to sustain it. These resources can include timely information, proper equipment, adequate staffing, support and encouragement, and administrative assistance.

Leadership and structure is also important, as team members must agree on who is to do what and ensure that all members contribute equally. The team needs to determine how schedules will be set, what skills need to be developed, how the group will resolve conflict and how it will make and modify any decisions.

Team members must trust each other and their leader. This facilitates cooperation, reduces the need to monitor each other's behaviour, bonds members and encourages willingness to accept and commit to the leader's goals and decisions.

Individual-oriented performance evaluation and reward systems must be modified to reflect team performance. This can be done through engaging. group-based appraisals, profit sharing schemes, gain-sharing and other small-group incentives.

Composition

Three different types of skills are required for a team to perform effectively - technical expertise, problem solving and decision making skills, and of course, interpersonal skills.

Teams that are higher in their levels of extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness to experience and emotional stability tend to perform better. It is important to note at this stage, that these characteristics can be identified by effective psychometric assessment, a reason why this is a powerful tool within any robust recruitment strategy. People should be selected for a team to ensure that all the various role 'types' are filled. Individuals often play multiple roles and managers need to understand the individual strengths that each person can bring to a team in order to get build the desired dynamics.

When a team is diverse in terms of personality, gender, age, education, functional specialisation and experience there is an increased probability that it will perform effectively.

The most effective teams have fewer than ten members which prevents group think (i.e. agreeing with the consensus rather than putting your true thoughts forward) and mutual accountability. Furthermore, this eases coordinating efforts when time pressure is present. Effective teams have multi-skilled and flexible members who can complete each other's tasks if necessary, making it less reliant on any single member. High performing teams are likely to be composed of people who prefer working as part of a group.

Work Design

Effective teams need to work together and take collective responsibility in order to complete significant tasks. This requires the opportunity to use different skills and talents, the ability to complete a whole and identifiable task or product, as well as working on a task or project that has a substantial impact on others.

Process

Effective teams have a common and meaningful purpose that provides direction, momentum and commitment for members. Translating a team's common purpose into specific, measurable and realistic performance goals makes for a more successful team. Effective teams have confidence in themselves. Teams that have previously been successful tend to feel positive about their future success.

Conflict can actually improve team effectiveness, as long as it is disagreement over task content rather than a relationship based conflict, the latter is most often dysfunctional and not conducive to team effectiveness. This is an important consideration given that many of us prefer to avoid any type of conflict within a team situation. However, teams need to be encouraged to express differences of opinions and problems solve in a constructive manner. This type of functional conflict is desirable as it increases innovation and reduces any tendencies toward group think.

While individuals can get away with hiding inside a group, effective teams circumvent this tendency because they hold themselves accountable at both the individual and team level.

Teams differ in form and structure and the purpose for which they were formed in the first place. The extensive use of teams creates the potential for an organisation to generate greater outputs with no increase in inputs, resulting in a true efficiency gain. However, the key word here is 'potential'. There is nothing inherently magical in the creation of teams that ensures the achievement of this positive synergy, but ensuring the elements detailed above are incorporated when setting up a team will go a long way to ensuring its effectiveness.