



Building an Effective IT Team Step-by-Step

July 2003 - Paula Moreira

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As you climb the IT career ladder, most IT managers and directors will tell you that the technology doesn't get any harder—it's the people that make the job tougher. The reason team building needs to be at the forefront of all your interactions is simple: Effective teams perform better. They get the job done quicker with fewer mistakes. And they enjoy themselves while they do their job, which ultimately leads to increased productivity, greater loyalty and a higher retention of employees. Over the course of your career as an IT manager, building effective teams will distinguish your effectiveness. We start off this month's column by taking a look at what your role is as a team leader. We then take a look at how you can quickly ramp up your team-building skills.

Understanding Your Role

I don't have to tell you that a team leader wears many hats in the course of the day-to-day business of running an IT department. Generally, we classify the different roles into the following three:

- **Driver:** Driving the actions and processes that promote team building.
- **Model:** Shaping behavior and performance to reflect the expectations set for the team.
- **Coach:** Acting as a mentor and tutor to help team members improve their performance.

While wearing these hats, you're also responsible for:

- Communicating information, policies and tasks.
- Providing direction on how to manage processes and evaluate results.
- Facilitating effective communication between the team and other groups.
- Encouraging process improvements and behaviors that support the team culture.
- Mediating conflicts.

When you're a new manager, it's easier to take a look at all these roles and apply a process. If you've been in your position for a while, it may be more difficult to recognize the purpose of the many hats you wear and their effect on overall team morale. And for those managers who have been in their positions for a while, recognizing that you may have to get back to basics may be the solution to solving a debilitating morale problem.

The Four Steps

Getting it right starts with four basic steps for starting the team off on the

right foot.

1. Get to know your team members.
2. Clearly identify everyone's roles and responsibilities.
3. Establish the team's goals.
4. Learn to operate as a team.

Getting to Know Your Team Members

Regardless of whether you are managing a new team or one that you've worked with for years, the most important aspect of team building is getting to know the people who make up the team. Effective team building is not just about driving people toward a common goal. There's a social aspect to team building that drives people's desire to be a part of the team. You stand a better chance of having things work out when you understand what drives each team member. Obviously their individual personalities will drive the dynamics of the team as a whole. (Why do you think there are so many personality tests out there?)

If you've led your team for a while, there will undoubtedly have been new members who have joined and some members who have left. Team dynamics change with each addition or loss. Each time, there's a need for readjustment. For more information on the different stages of team building, check out the sidebar.

Identify Roles and Responsibilities

The first role that you must clearly identify is your own. You must be able to articulate it to your staff in a clear and assertive manner. You may want to consider writing a personal statement on your management philosophy that includes what you expect from your team, how you plan to support them and what the best way to enlist your support is. Write your philosophy on an index card so that you can easily recite it, and keep it handy to give yourself a reminder once in a while and to consult when you hire new team members.

Next, clearly identify the roles and responsibilities of each of the team members. This eliminates overlap in responsibilities and ambiguity of whose job it is to do what. It is very difficult to build trust and empowerment within a team when your team members are unsure of the reporting structures and their task assignments. Productivity will decrease with ambiguity.

Establish Team Goals

In order to know that it has achieved its purpose, a team—whether it's a department or a project team—must have a clearly defined purpose and objectives. For a department, the purpose should be relatively easy to establish since it would consist of the department's function within the organization. Objectives should be in alignment with the IT department's direction and the company's strategic objectives.

Objectives should be realistic, timely and measurable. The team's goals provide an immediate focus while fitting into the company's larger, strategic goals. It's important to publicize these goals and work with your team to establish milestones to indicate progress against the goals. Team goals then translate to individual goals that can be measured as a part of the team members' performance plans.

And don't forget to celebrate when the team reaches its goals. Celebrations are the best way to bring a team together.

Operate as a Team

As a way of facilitating the right interaction between team members, you'll

want to put your own management practices into place, like scheduling regular staff meetings. Staff meetings offer structure and are a way of setting expectations on how to communicate and resolve issues going forward.

Besides staff meetings, you will need to determine how the group makes decisions about how goals should be achieved. Your first temptation will be to determine these processes yourself. Stop yourself. You will have plenty of opportunities to make decisions, but if you truly want to maximize the power of your team, you'll allow the team to solve problems together. Together, your team members will have more knowledge of technology and possibly of business practices than you will by yourself. Take advantage of your resources.

When it comes to team decisions, use consensus, as opposed to majority vote. Encourage team members to solve problems that are within their realm of expertise. Keep an open mind in seeking out the opinions and ideas of team members and provide positive reinforcement to team members for their participation.

Be clear about expectations and directions. Intervene when necessary to keep the team on track or to support them in how they plan to self-correct.

Skills You'll Need

To really capitalize on team building, you'll want to build up some additional skills yourself. Listening, which is the toughest of all the soft skills to master, is really the key here.

Active listening, the act of consciously listening to another, is particularly powerful. Most of us don't truly hear when we listen. We multi-task every minute of the day. When was the last time someone else actively listened to what you had to say without a television in the background, without responding to e-mail or being interrupted by the IM bell going off?

Other skills that you'll want to refresh include your own verbal communication skills. Your communication should be confident and assertive since you will need to provide feedback on a timely basis.

Why Teams Fail

Does getting to your objective necessarily mean that you have an effective team? Not necessarily.

A failed team may well have completed its deliverables and met its schedule, but the organization may fail to make meaningful use of its contributions. Poor management support and weak leadership are the most frequent drivers of team failure. Other reasons teams fail include limiting the focus to tasks while ignoring the interpersonal relationships, team members who do not take responsibility for themselves, inadequate resources to get the job done and an inadequate reward system.

How Do You Know You've Got a Team?

Building a well-functioning team can be a lot of work. What are the payoffs, and how do you know you've gotten there? When teams can work out conflict among themselves, when the team members understand their roles and shift responsibilities as needed, when team goals are just as important as individual goals—that's the payoff.

Paula Moreira is vice president of e-learning for New Horizons Computer Learning Centers Inc., the world's largest computer training company. Paula is also author of "Ace the IT Resume" and "Ace the IT Job Interview" (McGraw Hill).

Understanding the Phases of Team Building

There's actually a pattern that teams go through when coming together. No team ever comes together perfectly. Instead, all teams go through established phases:

Forming: The orientation period. People are unsure of what they are to accomplish. People want to be told what to do and will express feedback very politely or in private.

Storming: Increased comfort. People challenge the leader's authority, role and style of leadership.

Norming: The team starts working on problems together and works out a process for problem solving and dealing with conflict.

Performing: Team-building payoff. The team has achieved harmony, defined its tasks, worked out its relationships and is producing results. Leadership is provided by the team members best suited for the task at hand.

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