

Coach's Corner

The Art of Team Leadership



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Most physicians are trained as individual contributors and it's only on the job that they are actively confronted with the realities of working with teams.

As residents, and eventually as physicians in a given specialty, the teamwork they experience and are trained for in the emergency room or operating room, for example, is primarily focused on clear role delineation so each team member knows exactly what to do in any given situation. It's all about best practices and patient safety.

But what happens when technically competent people can't get along with each other? When they don't trust each other or are not buying in to the direction the leader wants to take them?

These and many other challenging questions often are not sufficiently raised in medical education. Yet these kinds of challenges can disrupt effective teamwork and inhibit goal achievement. Anyone who has broad organizational responsibility (e.g., CEOs, department chairs in an academic medical center, hospital VPs of administration, chief nursing officers, etc.) consistently face these questions.

In my May 2010 *PEJ* article "Three Essential Management Tasks," I wrote about the primary responsibilities of any organizational manager: managing yourself, managing your team and managing the business. Today, let's focus on managing your team.

Mastering the art of team leadership can mean the difference between a medical career that is very satisfying and productive and one that is a tension-filled, frustrating series of interpersonal conflicts.

What is a team?

Early in any team development initiative I am asked the question, "What is the difference between a team and

a group of people who report to the same person?" Usually the individual asking the question already knows that one's direct reports who meet together regularly do not necessarily make up a team.

Usually their question means their direct reports do not function like a team. They often are not cohesive or mutually accountable. Rather they tend to function in "silos" and simply coming together in meetings to share information about what they are doing and to receive direction from their boss.

The primary difference is that working groups focus on individual performance and accountabilities while teams focus more on group accountabilities and working together to achieve goals.

In their classic *Harvard Business Review* article, "The Discipline of Teams," Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith discuss working groups and teams and define a team as "a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, set of performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable."

- 1. Common Purpose:** One would think the purpose of any team is the easiest discipline to maintain. Not true! In practice, I find that individual team members often are unable to accurately articulate the purpose of their own team or working group because they had no part in creating the purpose or it has not been regularly and clearly articulated. Without their participation, buy-in to that purpose is challenging at best. I suggest that, soon after a team is formed, a purpose statement be crafted and that early on meetings begin with the statement of purpose and goals. Then, periodically remind the team of these direction-defining statements to provide clarity and avoid tangential discussions and wasted time.
- 2. Performance Goals:** Once the purpose is defined, specific performance goals need to be set. Goals must meet at least three criteria: they must be specific, performance-related and measurable. For example, "to reduce

Figure 1
Team Assessment

Based on The Discipline of Teams
For purposes of this exercise, “team” can be used interchangeably with “working group”

Team Discipline	Assessment Statements	Yes	No	Not Sure
Common Purpose	1. Our team has a clear purpose.			
	2. We have developed it together.			
	3. All team members are clear about what our purpose is.			
Common Commitment	4. Everyone is committed to our purpose.			
	5. Team members are clear about our performance goals.			
	6. Team members are committed to achieving our goals.			
Specific Performance Goals	7. We have specific performance goals.			
	8. We have worked on setting these goals together.			
Right Size	9. Our team is the right size to accomplish our goals.			
	10. The size of our team is conducive to open communication.			
Right Mix of Skills	11. We have the right mix of skills to accomplish our goals.			
	12. We have the appropriate technical or functional expertise to achieve our goals.			
	13. We have the appropriate problem solving and decision making skills to make good decisions.			
	14. Our interpersonal skills support healthy debate.			
Common Approach or Processes to Accomplish Purpose	15. We have identified common processes for getting things done.			
	16. We follow those processes consistently.			
Mutual Accountability – Based on Commitment and Trust	17. We hold one another accountable.			
	18. At the end of our meetings we confirm the who, what, when and how of implementing decisions we made.			
	19. Trust is not an issue for our team.			
	20. It is safe to engage in healthy conflict in team meetings.			
Totals				



patient safety incidents by 10 percent compared to last year” is better than “to improve patient safety” since it meets all three criteria.

3. **Commitment:** Once the goals are defined, it is critical that team members “own” them. During discussions about key decisions, many leaders make the mistake of pushing for consensus as an indicator of commitment, to the detriment of goal achievement. Consensus in these situations should be defined not as 100 percent agreement, but as the commitment to support the decision once it is made. Trying to reach 100 percent agreement is often futile and generally too time consuming. Reasonable people do not need to get their way in order to support a decision as long as their opinions have been heard and considered. One further tool for ensuring commitment is “end of meeting protocols.” Before any decision-making meeting concludes, whether with two people or 20, make sure to agree to and verbalize what has been decided, who is going to do what, when and how and any other specifics for holding one another accountable. The absence of such protocols puts many teams at risk of not achieving goals.
4. **Complementary Skills:** This should be a top priority of any team leader: choosing the right people to get the job done. Whether it’s a team to run an organization or just a project, complementary skills are critical to achieving the team’s purpose and performance goals. Beginning with the purpose and goals, define success factors and the skill sets, experience and knowledge that are needed to achieve them.
5. **Number of Team Members:** While most teams fall somewhere between two and 20 member category,

Katzenbach and Smith recommend that the number of team members not exceed 10. My experience confirms this. You want a large enough team to cover the major areas for which the team is accountable while at the same time keeping it small enough to ensure open communication and healthy debate. Besides the number the roles of the team are also very important. This may be counterintuitive, but not everyone who reports to you should automatically be on your “team.” It depends on the team’s purpose. When the purpose and goals only apply to selected direct reports, they are the ones who should be on the team with that purpose.

6. **Team Processes:** It can be very useful to develop agreed-upon processes and approaches to problem solving, decision making, communication, etc. The emphasis once again is on the phrase “agreed-upon.” If everyone has a say in how things get done it is more likely that something actually will get done.
7. **Mutual Accountability:** This becomes the real test of a team: can team members hold themselves accountable to one another? We all expect that managers will hold direct reports accountable. What’s different with true teams is that, by team members holding one another accountable to behavioral norms, team processes and specific goals, the team demonstrates its commitment to and trust in one another. Even when the team leader is not present, teams that are mutually accountable keep on track to achieve goals and help one another when obstacles come up. This is what energizes teams and makes working in teams so fulfilling compared to some working groups or committees that share information but are not in the same boat rowing together toward a commonly

accepted destination.

Trust and healthy conflict

The seven elements just discussed can all be present but the team still can be derailed from its purpose. This is often due to the absence of trust and the fear of conflict. In his popular book, *The Five Dysfunctions of A Team*, Patrick Lencioni explains that trust and the ability to engage in healthy conflict are foundational for all teams.

Absence of Trust

This occurs when team members are reluctant to be vulnerable with one another and are unwilling to admit their mistakes, weaknesses or needs for help. Without a certain comfort level among team members, a foundation of trust is impossible. Learning about one another’s communication style, getting to know each other better and consistently delivering on what you promise are some good strategies for increasing trust.

Fear of Conflict

Teams that are lacking in trust are incapable of engaging in unfiltered, passionate debate about key issues, causing situations where team conflict can easily turn into veiled discussions and back channel comments.

In a work setting where team members do not openly air their opinions, inferior decisions are the result. To overcome this dysfunction the team minimally needs to learn how to better listen to one another—i.e., active or reflective listening—and agree on norms for team behavior to support productive debate.

Being aware of and working toward preventing these dysfunctions makes it much more likely that your team leadership will be effective.



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