

Project Teams That Get Results

Every project team is formed for the same purpose: to work collaboratively to address and offer solutions to a particular issue or problem. While this goal may not seem too challenging on the surface, many groups fail to achieve it. Lack of direction, personality conflicts, and poor work processes

are just a few of the common reasons teams get off track.

When leading a project team, it's your responsibility to maximize the group's efforts and ensure successful completion of the initiative. To increase your chances for success, you'll need to invest time in preparation and coordination even before the first participants are selected.

Define your strategy

Begin by creating an action plan that specifies the group's mission, the types of expertise required to achieve this objective, and how team members will work together. Critical questions to answer include: How long will the group need to be active? What are the different components of the project and the deadlines for completing them? Is the team responsible for generating and implementing its suggestions? Will the group operate independently, or will any of its activities overlap with those managed by full-time employees currently not on the team?

Be sure you have researched how the project impacts the department or company so you can convey its importance at the first team meeting. Also, create a handout (e.g., a timeline), and gather supporting materials that can be used for reference.

Build the team

When selecting the team members, be sure to evaluate their interpersonal and communication skills as well as their individual professional abilities and expertise. A cost accountant with solid analytical skills may have the knowledge you need to assess an acquisition target's operations and inventory, but if he lacks the ability to explain



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his analysis effectively to colleagues outside accounting or finance, you'll need to either help him develop those skills or appoint someone with a persuasive communication style to co-present.

Ask others in your company for recommendations of people who would be appropriate for the project. Always check with each individual's manager before making a final selection to ensure that a potential team member can commit the necessary time and effort to the initiative.

In addition to identifying employees to meet specific project needs, you may also want to select a coordinator. This person periodically would collect, organize, and distribute status reports to everyone in the group.

Promote success

After team members have been iden-



tified, plan an initial meeting to review the action plan you drafted. Encourage feedback from participants so they feel more connected to the project and upcoming assignments. You may also want to establish protocols for certain practices such as conflict resolution and expenditure approvals to help prevent misunderstandings and encourage more effective collaboration. Once final guidelines and expectations have been agreed upon, distribute a revised action plan to everyone involved.

As team leader, you must walk a fine line between coaching and micromanaging. When participants come to you with problems or challenges, encourage them to develop their own solutions, and reward those who take reasonable risks to make improvements. Sometimes the difficulties encountered during a project can spur innovative ideas that are transferable to other groups or the company as a whole.

Evaluate the team's progress periodically to make sure everyone is contributing. If an individual's regular work demands are affecting his or her ability to complete project requirements, you may need to select a substitute participant who has the necessary time. Also pay attention to the level of interaction during group meetings. Sometimes a few people

will speak up more than others. While you want to avoid discouraging their input, make sure that quieter team members don't feel intimidated. An administrative professional should be just as comfortable as a financial executive when sharing ideas that might help the team. You may need to solicit comments from certain employees to prompt their participation.

Providing motivation should be an ongoing priority. Even when things aren't going smoothly, do your best to keep the mood upbeat and positive. Try to begin each meeting with a summary of accomplishments before you address problems. Also take time to acknowledge and celebrate project milestones. You will help to maintain productivity and generate ongoing enthusiasm for the initiative.

In your role as team leader, you play a pivotal role in helping a group get results. Your strategy should include careful consideration of potential participants and sufficient direction and motivation once the team is formed. The right approach will encourage more effective collaboration among participants while maximizing the team's contribution to the organization. ■

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